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by THOMAS THOMPSON

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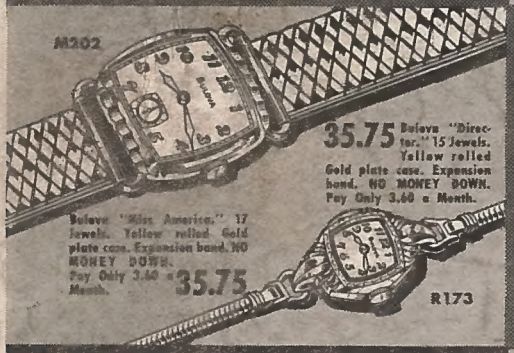
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Vol. 24, No. 3 CONTENTS May, 1952

TWO HARD-HITTING WESTERN NOVELETTES

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The Strawboss

THERE aren't many of that old breed left—the gun-hung gents who stalked through the Old West leaving their brand on history. Most of them are long under the sod, planted in the boothills they themselves so lavishly populated, or, gentled by age, dead of the diseases and ailments most of us, living in a quieter era, fall heir to.

But a few, a bare handful, are still on this earth, waiting for time to deliver them back to the company of friends they once knew in Tombstone, and Deadwood, and Virginia City, and Dodge, and all the other stopping places on the old trails.

Of this handful, George Bolds is a prominent member. An ex-peace officer himself, he knew many of the famous sheriffs and outlaws of that bygone day, and today he spends much of his time in recollection. Here is his story of the last time he saw Wyatt Earp, famous marshal of Tombstone, Arizona.

I met Wyatt Earp in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1891 and that two day and night visit was the last time I saw him alive. His tales of the early days in Tombstone when he first arrived were so interesting that I'll never forget them. No wonder Tombstone was called the home of the six-shooter and silver.

Tombstone was the home of the outlaws. Curly Bill, one of its citizens, was an outlaw and he was proud of it. He didn't care a damn who knew it. He was always look-

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(Continued from page 6)

ing around for some place to rob and it mattered not what it was. He'd done all kinds of robbing and killing, so he wasn't held back when he spotted the church. He went to work while the services were being held. He didn't miss anybody. Maybe that big pair of six-shooters hanging at his sides had something to do with it, but anyway he got a hatful of cash. It was the largest collection the members ever saw.

The law in Tombstone at that time was Big Jim Burnett, the justice of the peace. The next day Burnett leveled a shotgun at Curly Bill's head and said, "Curly Bill, you're under arrest, and court is now in session."

"What for?" Curly Bill asked. He was puzzled, as he'd not killed anyone for at least twenty-four hours.

"For disturbing the peace and interrupting church meetings," Big Jim said. "You're fined twenty-five dollars, and I want it right now."

Curly Bill paid up, and it sure cured him of robbing churches.

Jim Burnett was about the same sort of a judge as Roy Bean, the saloonkeeper, who handed out his special brand of justice in the Big Bend country of Texas and was known as the "Law west of the Pecos." Court was always in session when either one found a culprit to bleed. Neither Bean nor Burnett needed law books, as the six-shooter or shotgun was plenty.

One time Burnett fined Jawbone Clark fifty dollars for being drunk in his own dance hall. Then the judge took a hand in a poker game that was going strong in the place. He bucked into a full house with a pat flush that cleaned him. He got up and went back to Jawbone.

"You're under arrest," he told Jawbone.

"You just got through arresting me, and I paid my fine," Jawbone protested.

"I'm arresting you for allowing a full house to beat a pat flush. The fine is fifty dollars."

Jawbone paid up and the justice of the peace was soon back in the poker game.

All the crimes that happened in Tombstone didn't get as far as the justice of the peace. Necktie parties were as popular there as they were in the other camps when the law-and-order crowd figured justice was taking too long. John Heath, a rustler and robber, was in the calabose for plying his trade. When they thought he'd been there a little too long a crowd took him out and strung him up. And there were many others.

Most of the frontier justices had their own ideas about handling the law. Bob Wright, a Dodge City pioneer, in his story about the Cowboy Capital, told a good one about a Dodge justice of the peace named Joyce. A couple of Irishmen working on the railroad got into a fight. One cracked the other over the head with a crowbar and killed him. They were both boarding at Mrs. Joyce's boarding house. The slayer felt pretty blue about it and he came in and gave himself up. They took him before Judge Joyce to face a charge of second-degree murder.

"How do you plead, Mike—guilty or not guilty," the judge asked him.

"Guilty, your honor."

"Shut your mouth, you damn fool," the judge interrupted. "Case discharged for lack of evidence!"

Curly Bill's trip to the church was something like the experience another preacher had up in Colorado in a mining camp. The circuit rider pulled a Bible out of his saddlebags, started up the gulch telling everybody he was going to hold a meeting to take a few whacks at old Satan, who sure was having things his own way. The camp was full of wild women, gamblers and drunken miners. They didn't want any gospel shouter to bust in. After the word got pretty well breezed around, a delegation of the toughest miners cornered the preacher.

"See here, Parson," they told him, "we don't want any of your damn psalm-singing

(Continued on page 107)

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Anaconda Ain't Refined

By JOHN T. LYNCH

BECAUSE she had been a focal point of Montana and northern Idaho ever since the 60's, when the first gold was found in the region, Helena had every right to consider herself the rightful capital city of Montana. As a political center and temporary capital since territorial days, Helena became alarmed when the upstart smelter town of Anaconda started to campaign to become the lawful capital.

Anaconda, at first called "Copperopolis," was the result of careful thought and planning by copper baron Marcus Daly, who disliked Helena's pretensions toward civic culture. A plain man, Daly hated the "society" life as led by the many millionaires, and their families, in the older city. Helena, at the time, boasted more millionaires per capita than any place else in the world.

Daly, owner of a vast fortune himself, poured great amounts of money into his campaign to make his own town popular with the rest of the voters throughout the state. He imported New York newspapermen, at huge expense, to run a top-notch newspaper for the sole purpose of telling the people of the region what a great place Anaconda was, and why it should be voted capital city.

The battle for recognition by the voters became more of a war of words—through newspapers, placards, posters and placards —than anything else. The city fathers of Helena also imported some high-class word slingers.

Both sides, in the early stages of the ink-stained battle, merely used dignified editorials, without mud-slinging or sarcasm. But the kid-glove policy did not last long. The big eruption came when the Helena paper stated that Anaconda was a small and ugly village, without social distinction. "A morass of ignorance, hopelessly steeped in permanent vulgarity, without the faintest notions of the better things of life, including the arts and sciences."

From this point, insults flew thick and fast. Finally, on the eve of the big election to name the capital, the Anaconda newspaper sarcastically "conceded" that Helena, after all, should become the permanent capital. The reasons:

1. Helena is socially supreme. It is the center of Montana's refinement, gentility, mixed drinks and progressive euchre.

2. Helena's criminal classes are always very polite. They never fail to delicately wipe off the knife, after slitting a throat.

3. We of Anaconda have no finer feelings. We lack tallyhoes, waxed floors, boiled shirts and plug hats. The ore trains make the earth tremble so much that it is difficult to elevate a glass of liquor to the lips.

4. As our many honest working men, and their families, love good solid food, the horrible fumes of corned-beef and cabbage hover over the city like a blanket.

5. We can't compare with Helena when it comes to social functions. Helena has more parties, balls, soirees, pink teas, low dresses; it keeps later hours, runs bigger bar bills and indulges in a greater number of bows, salaams, scrapes, courtesies and decorous lynchings than any other city, north, south, east or west.

6. Helena has the finest, most exclusive and most heavily mortgaged clubhouses in the country. Vote for Helena!

Sarcasm or not, the people did vote in favor of Helena, but the classic battle of words will never be forgotten. To Helena went the victory, and the last remark: "Anaconda refines copper, but can't refine itself!" ● ● ●

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But what people didn't know was that father and son hated—detested—one another.

For a time the animosity between father and son, though nearly overpowering, was kept under control. But when the older man brought young, spirited Helen into their home, the house could not contain the passions her arrival aroused, and father and son became locked in deadly combat.

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OR

INHERIT THE NIGHT by Robert Christie
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It was sundown when Kurt Werden reached the tiny pueblo high in the Andes. He carried a heavy pistol and an old newspaper clipping which read, ENEMY LEADER DIES IN BESIEGED CITY. He demanded an impossible thing—to be taken to San Cobar.

The villagers had heard of San Cobar. The old legends said that it was a place of great wealth. But it lay beyond the mountains from which no man had returned alive. True, El Borracho, the drunken trader, had returned from his mysterious wanderings with rich ornaments, but he was now far gone in drink.

The stranger showed El Borracho more gold than he had ever seen, enough to make him forget the terrible mountain gales, the yawning crevasses.

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THAT COLT-SLINGING

He was a different Clayt Winston now from the helpless clodhopper they'd burned out three years before. For now he was willing to pay for his land and his woman in the only kind of coin that talked loud in that bloody country—hot lead!

By

THOMAS THOMPSON

CHAPTER ONE

Trail's End

A HALF DOZEN men recognized Clayt Winston as he rode into the town of Seco. That was all right. Clayt had no intentions of keeping his return a secret. And in case there was any doubt, within the hour everyone would know why he had come back. Clayt intended to see to that. He shifted his gunbelt and rode on down the street toward the saloon. This was Saturday afternoon and the long twilight was coming across the up country. The ones who mattered, Clayt figured, would be in town.

He was a man in his middle twenties, tall and hard-muscled, a man with blue eyes and old bitterness in the set of his thin-lipped mouth, stubbornness in the block of his chin. He was wickedly tired. It showed in the lines of his face, in the tense set of his shoulders and in the way he sat in his

At the window, Clayt yelled, "It's Clayt Winston! Come and get us!"

CLODHOPPER!

saddle. But there was an energetic drive about him that surmounted the tiredness. It was the determination of a man who had been turned back once and would never be turned back again.

He dismounted in front of the saloon and for a second he stood there, saddle stiff and bone weary, a month of trail driving immediately behind him, three grueling years of becoming a whole man behind that. The trail driving itself was a surface weariness that could be cured with rest; the greater weight that pulled at his muscles was the memory of defeat and of a girl he had lost.

A boisterous racket came out of the saloon and floated down the single street of Warren Gregory's little cow town. A dozen horses stood at the hitch rail, most of them branded Slash R, a couple with Gregory's bold Three G's. Clayt noticed the brands and wondered. The numerical distribution should have been reversed. He didn't worry about it. He knew both brands. He would try to get along with Mike Ringold, owner of the Slash R. He would fight Warren Gregory and his Three G's regardless. Warren Gregory was the man who had run Clayt Winston out of this country three years back.

Clayt let his gunbelt out one notch. He stood there for just a second, flexing the supple fingers of his long hands. The intensity of his remembering was so strong that he didn't see the woman coming down the sidewalk. He gave his hat brim a solid tug and started toward the saloon door. He collided with the woman.

Her arms were loaded with bundles and they spilled and scattered on the sidewalk. His hands reached out and gripped her arms in an involuntary movement to keep her from falling, and standing there near her that way he could sense her closeness, the fragrance of her hair. The vitality of her body seemed to reach out and seize him, reminding him of the long nights without feminine companionship. He stared down at her, still holding her arms, and he saw the black hair, the full red lips, the deep blue eyes. She was beautifully gowned and each ripple of her dress accented her startling femininity. Clayt Winston knew he was staring at her and he couldn't help it. He remembered Lorraine Fortuna all right, but he didn't remember her this way. "Lorraine!" he stammered. He released her arms and swept off his hat.

Her voice was low and throaty, the sort of voice that can reach out and caress a man. Clayt felt the blood rush to his cheeks. "Clayt Winston," she said. "You finally get near me and then you practically knock me down. Are you always so rough?"

HE LOOKED at this girl he had known when he was in this country before. She had always fascinated him, but she was a girl to leave alone, men said. He looked at her now and wondered what it was about her that had changed so. The good clothes, yes, and the full maturity of womanhood. But it was more than that. There was a sureness about her that hadn't come from her past as the daughter of a man who had once been worth a fortune, then lost it and died as the town drunk. He remembered how he used to feel sorry for Lorraine, and he remembered just as suddenly that she was a person who fought against anyone trying to help her. She had acquired a rather murky reputation, deliberately, it seemed, and she went out of her way to shock people. That was the Lorraine Fortuna Clayt had known three years ago. This was not the same girl.

This Lorraine was sure of herself—almost arrogantly sure. Clayt realized she was appraising him coldly, letting her eyes run over his tall frame, lingering a moment on his face, lingering again on the gun at his hip, the gun Clayt Winston had learned to use in these past three years. A quick smile found her lips. She said, "You could help me pick up my packages."

She stood there smiling at him, her arms out. He stooped quickly and started retrieving the packages. As he loaded them into her outstretched arms he again found her eyes searching his face. She seemed to be everywhere, surrounding him, filling the twilight with her presence, adding a splash of vivid, exciting color to the drab town. He picked up the last package and handed it to her. "Gosh, Lorraine," he said. "I'm sorry."

For a swift, tantalizing second her eyes were smoky and her full lips were half parted. "You aren't really sorry, are you, Clayt Winston?" she said. She turned and her shoulder brushed him. "And by the way, Clayt," she said. "It's not Lorraine Fortuna any more. I'm Lorraine Ringold now." Her eyes met his, almost challengingly, and then she moved down the sidewalk. Clayt watched her, his breathing quickened.

The name she had given him kept racing through his mind. Ringold. There was only one Ringold in this country and that was old Mike Ringold, owner of the Slash R. Clayt had heard that Mike was married, but he surely couldn't be married to Lorraine Fortuna. Mike was a man near seventy; Lorraine was no more than twenty. Lorraine had known old Mike all her life. She wouldn't marry him. An unbidden thought crossed Clayt's mind. If this girl was married to Mike, which one of the two would deserve the pity?

She was down where the sidewalk ended now, going over toward the hotel. Here the space between the buildings let the long, orange light of the sun drift across the street. He saw the warm reflection on her face and then a man came out of the hardware store beyond and stepped in front of the girl, blocking her way. Lorraine tried to pass and the man put out his hand and stopped her. The fleeting excitement the woman had stirred in Clayt Winston was gone. He looked at the man and saw the black, wavy hair, the familiar perfection of the man's profile. It was Norvil Lane. The bitterness was heavy in Clayt again, for there, talking to Lorraine Ringold, was one of the men Clayt Winston had come back to smash. Warren Gregory, owner of Three G's; Norvil Lane, Gregory's foreman. And two more. Those two would be in the saloon, he decided.

The tiredness was back, and with it came the old determination that had brought him back to Seco. He would play this alone; he would not let sentiment get in the way. His face was hard and set as he opened the door and entered the saloon. He felt the blast of smoke and noise and human warmth pressing around him.

HE STOOD there a long time. He wanted them all to have a good look. His eyes ran down the bar and he picked out the two he wanted. Rip Goforth, who had been a shotgun guard on the stage before he went to work for Three G's. Kelly, who had been a faro dealer before Warren Gregory hired his gun. Both men were dressed in well-used range garb. They both wore guns, belted around their waists, the holsters low. Clayt saw Rip and Kelly staring at him. He saw the worried recognition in the eyes of the bartender.

And down at the end of the bar, just as if he hadn't moved in three years, Clayt saw old Dad Berkshire, ex-soldier, ex-army scout, ex-gunfighter, ex-sheriff, ex-anything that had work attached to it. Clayt Winston walked through the room, feeling every eye on him. He walked to the far end of the bar. There was a grin on his face and he put out his hand. "Damned if it ain't Dad Berkshire," Clayt said.

The old man at the bar stared at Clayt Winston with steady blue eyes. Dad Berkshire's hair was white, and his face, the color of good leather, was seamed and lined. He was six feet tall and as straight as an arrow, and he gave the impression that he had once been even taller and straighter. He was a man who had looked

on life and found it lacking and now most of the world, to him, was a tiresome joke. His attitude gave him a slashing honesty and directness. His age and the undisputed authenticity of his past reputation kept him from getting killed. He looked at Clayt Winston and casually accepted the offered hand.

"Damned if it ain't the clodhopper back looking for more trouble," Dad Berkshire said. "I thought you decided to give up farming when Greg Warren burned your shack and whipped your tail out of the country for chasing his daughter."

They were watching him now, Clayt knew. Watching him and listening. This was the time to say what he had to say and say it plain. He pushed back his hat and stepped up to the bar, but he kept his right side turned toward the room and he poured with his left hand.

Clayt drank and he saw the old man's interested eyes watching him steadily. "I did give up farming, Dad," Clayt said. He laughed a short, dry laugh. "You run into too many varmints. And besides, it hems a man in too much. Hell, I only had a quarter section of land out there in the Basin between the Three G's and the Slash R. That ain't enough land to let a man set down."

There was a silence along the bar now. Rip Goforth and Kelly were side by side and they had pushed two other men out of the way. Rip Goforth was a big man, thick through the shoulders. He set his shot glass down hard.

"So?" Dad Berkshire said. The old man's eyes were bright and his expression said that he had suddenly found something worth watching in a very dull and tiresome world.

"So I decided to go into the cow business," Clayt said. He was looking straight at Rip Goforth and Kelly now. "I decided if I wanted to grab off big chunks of ground like Warren Gregory does I'd have to go into the cow business to do it."

"That takes cows," Dad Berkshire said. "Cows and money."

"I got cows," Clayt Winston said. "Five hundred head I trailed up from Texas. I'll pay for the next round of drinks."

Rip Goforth moved slowly down the bar. He had fished a toothpick out of his vest pocket and now he had it thrust in the corner of his mouth. He walked slowly, planting his feet solidly, and his hands were out from his sides. There was the semblance of a bleak, hard grin on his lips. He stopped six feet from Clayt. "Hello, clodhopper," Rip said. "Thought I smelt hominy grits and sorghum when the door opened and you come in."

Clayt Winston looked at the man who had beaten him half to death three years ago. The savage satisfaction of knowing Rip Goforth couldn't do it again was strong on Clayt.

"I reckon those batwing ears of yours weren't sticking out far enough, Rip," Clayt said. "I was just telling Dad here I graduated from farming, just like I graduated from the coal-mining business. I'm in the cow business now."

"I saw a herd of something comin' up the trail yesterday," Rip said. "Thought it was rabbits." He wiped a finger across his nose. "I'll tell your old pal Norvil Lane you got some cows. Maybe he'll offer to buy 'em from you. I hear tell Norvil's runnin' short of cows."

There was nervous laughter but a hot, flat tension lay in the room.

"Don't bother, Rip," Clayt said. "My cows ain't for sale. They're stockers. I'm moving them into the old Basin where my homestead used to be." He felt the new strength of returned health and gun knowledge well learned, and his eyes held the eyes of the men in the room. "Only this time, Rip," Clayt said, "instead of me claiming just one little quarter section, I'm taking over the whole damned Basin. I figured you'd want to know. And I wanted to be the one to tell you."

CHAPTER TWO

Half a Man

CLAYT WINSTON heard his own words and they were words he had been waiting three years to say. He had planned them, said them over and over to himself, pictured this meeting. But the words, now that he said them, were the words of a stranger, and he stood there as if he were completely detached from this scene, a man watching a man he didn't know asking for a fight.

Rip Goforth stared with unbelieving eyes and then he threw back his head and laughed. Everyone at the bar joined in the laughter. Everyone with the exception of Dad Berkshire. The old man was staring hard at Clayt Winston, seeing something the others hadn't seen.

Rip Goforth nearly choked on his own laughter. He stood there wheezing and blowing, tears of genuine mirth streaming from the corners of his eyes. Finally he half turned to the others. "Boys," he said, "if you can find out what this one-lung clodhopper has been drinkin' I want to buy a jug of it. Hells bells, I'll feed it to a mouse and have him spittin' in the panther's eye!"

A satisfied anger ran through every muscle of Clayt Winston's body. He didn't mind Rip calling him a "one lung." He had grown used to that. He had long ago quit trying to explain to people that it wasn't a disease he had—that it had come from his years in the soft-coal mines. Here in the West any Easterner with a cough was a "lunger." Let them consider him a harmless pilgrim to be pushed around. That was all right.

Kelly, the dark, thin ex-faro dealer, slapped his hand on the bar. "You offered to buy a drink for the house, lunger," Kelly said. "How about it?"

There was a strange smile at the corners of Dad Berkshire's lips. He was studying the deep tan of Clayt Winston's face, the burned-in tan of a man who has lived completely in the open. "So you got yourself well, did you, Winston?" Dad Berkshire said quietly. His eyes strayed to the gun on Clayt's hip. "You got yourself well and you spent three years learning how to use a gun and now you're set." The old man's eyes searched Clayt's face. "Tell me, Winston," Dad Berkshire said, "did you really come back to go into the cattle business or did you come back to show Warren Gregory what a fine son-in-law he missed by not letting you marry Connie?"

"Shut up, old man," Clayt Winston said.

Dad Berkshire laughed. "Funny," he said, "when you face a man with the truth about himself it always makes him mad."

"How about that drink, clodhopper?" Kelly called.

Dad Berkshire looked at the two gunmen and shook his head. "You better take it easy, boys," he said. "I think you've got a he-skunk by the tail. Reckon I'll go get some air." He moved through the room, tall and straight, and they heard his firm step on the board sidewalk.

Clayt Winston hadn't moved. He stood there, his hand out from his side, his eyes boring into Rip Goforth. Suddenly the dull realization that this farmer actually did want to fight came into the big man's eyes. "What the hell's eatin' on you, clodhopper?" Rip said. "You want me to take a pair of chaps to you?"

"I'd rather see you try for that gun, Rip," Clayt said. "The way I got it figured, I'll have to kill you sooner or later. It might as well be now."

The voice of the bartender was soft. "Damn you to hell," he said. "Not in my place." Clayt glanced toward the bartender and saw the wicked sawed-off barrel of the shotgun laying across the bar. "Pete," the bartender called to one of the men at the end of the bar. "Collect the guns of everybody in the house."

The man called Pete moved away from

the bar. He had a six-shooter in his hand. One by one the men at the bar handed over their guns and then Pete came to where Rip and Clayt were facing each other.

"Hand 'em over, you two," the bartender ordered. "If there's any killing in my saloon, I do it." Rip and Clayt stood there facing each other, straining toward each other. "Shuck 'em!" the bartender snapped. He cocked the shotgun.

Pete moved over around behind Clayt and lifted the gun from its holster. At the same moment one of Mike Ringold's Slash R riders lifted Rip Goforth's gun.

It was as if a trigger had been tripped on a tightly coiled spring. Rip Goforth lunged forward, his massive arms spread wide.

THE cold, familiarity of much practice was on Clayt Winston. He remembered countless days under a blazing desert sun when he had practiced with willing Mexican vaqueros for just this moment. He shifted his feet and drove his fist. He felt it crack against Rip Goforth's jaw.

The big man stumbled back, shaking his head, hurt, bewildered. The sharp intake of breath of all the men at the bar was loud in the room. Everything Clayt Winston had learned in three years was falling into place now. Follow through when you've got a man on his heels. . . . He stepped forward with the quick, light step of a dancer and pumped short, savage blows into Rip Goforth's face.

Rip threw up his arms. Another signal. Another thing to remember. Clayt Winston's left jabbed like a piston and sunk wrist deep into Goforth's middle. Rip's arms came down and there was that jutting jaw. Clayt's blow was short and fast and hard, and Goforth was down.

Clayt stood there, breathing hard, fighting down the excitement that was in him. This was the beginning, and it was a good beginning. But this time he had had surprise on his side. He wouldn't have it next time. He looked at these men at the bar, men who had known him as a half-dead farmer struggling harder to regain his health than to grow a crop. He saw a reluctant respect on some of the faces.

"My brand's a Running W," Clayt said then. "My range is the free grass between the Three G's and the Slash R. I'll be needing a couple of hands. I pay the usual wages." He walked up to the end of the bar and took his gun from the stack and turned toward the door.

The noise of the fight had attracted a crowd. The doors were wide open. He saw Dad Berkshire there and he saw Norvil Lane. Standing next to Lane was the girl Lorraine. There was a smile on her lips, excitement in her eyes, and she was gripping her hands at her sides. Clayt Winston walked straight toward them, and he spoke to Lorraine Ringold. "Your husband and me always got along all right," Clayt said. "Tell him I hope we can keep it that way."

Clayt didn't speak to Norvil Lane. By not making Lane the same offer he had made Slash R, he had let Lane know how it was to be. Beyond that he couldn't trust himself to speak to Norvil Lane. Not yet. For the thing between Clayt Winston and Norvil Lane was a more personal thing than land and cows. It had to do with Connie Gregory, the girl Clayt Winston had loved.

He pushed through the crowd at the door and started toward his horse and he felt the light touch of a hand on his arm. He half turned and saw Lorraine Ringold standing there looking up at him. "That was nice work, Clayt Winston," Lorraine said. "I didn't know you had it in you, but I'm glad you have." She made him meet her eyes. "I like a man who can carry a grudge," she said. "It shows he has spirit. I'd go a long ways to help such a man." He saw her eyes, smoky with tantalizing promise, and the full lips were moist. "If you remember," she said, "it was Warren Gregory who ruined my father."

"All right," Clayt said. He was surprised to find that he didn't agree with her. Lorraine's father was a man who had ruined himself. At any rate, he didn't have time to talk history with the new Mrs. Ringold. He had come here to Seco country to find the men he intended to whip. He wanted to let them know plainly and completely that he intended to whip them. He had found them, with the exception of one man, and that man was the kingpin. Warren Gregory hadn't been in the saloon Warren Gregory would know soon enough that Clayt was back, but Clayt didn't want it to get to Gregory second hand. He reined the horse and headed down the street, spurring his mount into an easy lope.

AT THE edge of the town he took the familiar wagon road, the wagon road that led by his old homestead in the Basin From there, a short-cut trail across the hills led to the Three G's headquarters. The pain in Clayt Winston's chest wasn't from his old, now-cured sickness. It was a pain that came from the memory of the moonlight that had been on that trail. It came from the flowers that had bloomed there and from the little bench, high on the ridge, where he and Connie Gregory had let their horses graze. There he had talked to her and they had made their plans. He rode now with the sunset in his eyes.

It seemed like a thousand years ago and it seemed like yesterday. The picture of Connie Gregory was vivid in his mind—the quiet sweetness of her face, her eyes violet and soft with understanding, the confidence she had in him. "Half a man," he thought bitterly. That was what Warren Gregory had called him, and Warren Gregory had run him out of the country because the daughter of Warren Gregory would never marry half a man.

He came to the edge of the Basin, a lush place of free grass, open to anyone who could hold it. He saw the lazy stream winding through the center of it. Beyond, in the cottonwoods, was the place where he had built his little cabin.

He remembered the night they had burned him out and the thing that had led to it. He and Connie had told Warren Gregory of their love. The cattle king had been insane with rage. "My daughter marry a clodhopper?" he shouted. "Norvil Lane has already asked for my daughter's hand and by God he'll have it. You've got stars in your eyes, Connie, and I wouldn't be a father if I didn't knock 'em out. I'll drive this damn clodhopper so far out of the country you'll never see him again and after he's gone a week you'll forget him. He's no man for you, Connie. He's only half a man!"

They came to his cabin that night, Rip Goforth, Kelly, the others. Riders for Warren Gregory's Three G's. They yanked him out of bed and they burned his cabin. He had struggled with buckets of water from the creek, gasping for breath. They sat there and laughed at him and when the fire had won and he was completely exhausted and there was a bloody froth on his lips Rip Goforth had stepped out of his saddle and beaten him until he was half senseless. Rip Goforth would have killed him if it hadn't been for Norvil Lane. Norvil Lane had stepped in and pulled Goforth off, but he had done if for a good reason, Clayt figured. Norvil Lane wanted Connie to think of him in the proper light.

So he'd left the country, because there was nothing else to do. He wasn't strong enough to fight back. He wrote to Connie, but he got no answer and in time he knew in his tortured mind that she had listened to her father. She had chosen Norvil Lane. The driving bitterness and hatred in Clayt's mind turned to momentary confusion as it often did when he thought of Connie. How much of this fight that was in him now was righteous revenge and how much was self-pity because he hadn't held the girl he loved? Dad Berkshire, he knew, had sensed that confusion.

He rode up the grassy slope, past the place where he had often met with Connie. He didn't glance that way. Below him, at the end of the tremendous valley, he saw the headquarters of the Three G's. His lips pulled tight and his battered knuckles throbbed with a wholly satisfying pain. He rode down the slope and into the familiar surroundings of corrals and outbuildings.

The buildings, he noticed, needed paint, and the big house which had always been so impressive to him looked neglected. There were no horses in the corrals, no smoke from the bunkhouse. It gave him a savage satisfaction to notice these things, for that too was part of winning his battle with himself. Once this ranch headquarters had awed him as an unbeatable adversary. He had looked at it and seen power and wealth and it had made him more conscious of his own sickness and his lack of money. Now he looked at it and saw it as something he could whip, and time had helped him. Even Warren Gregory couldn't whip time.

He tried to feel objective pleasure in his hatred but he couldn't. There was something disturbing about seeing the apparent decay of Three G's. It was almost an affirmation that nothing is permanent and, therefore, nothing is worth while. He thought of Connie and Norvil Lane and the hard lines were back around his lips and again the disturbing thought was with him, the question as to whom he was fighting—Warren Gregory or himself.

He rode on to the white fence and dismounted. He had lifted the latch when the door opened and Connie Gregory came out on the porch.

CHAPTER THREE

Trail Meeting

HE HAD planned this too, this first meeting with Connie. At first when he planned it there was a deep bitterness in him and he had wanted to wound her as deeply as she had wounded him. But in time that had passed and he had forced himself to admit that none of it had been of her doing. He had let them run him out; he had made no attempt to come back and claim her. These things he knew, secretly, but a man does not admit his own weakness. Instead he makes excuses and hides behind a thick wall called pride. So he would meet her with an unfeeling casualness such as he had shown toward Dad Berkshire. She was only a bystander in this drama he had decided to play out. She was no longer of any importance in his scheme of things.

He stood there with his hand on the gate latch, looking up at her, and he saw the startled recognition on her face. Her eyes were still that blue he remembered so well, and that he had looked for so many times in the softness of an evening sky. She had changed, he saw, but he couldn't tell how any more than he had been able to tell exactly what the change was in Lorraine Ringold. With Connie it was a wistfullness that was new, a maturity tinged with worry. She started toward him, running down off the porch and halfway up the walk, and then she stopped, uncertain, and her hand was at her throat. "Clayt!" she said. "You're back! I knew you'd come back. And you look wonderful. You're well!"

A man could plan a thing for three years. Or he could plan it for fifty years. It made little difference. There was always one thing, one eventuality that he overlooked. Her words reached out to him, opening an old wound. He had known that this moment would be a test and he knew that he couldn't weaken now or everything he had planned would be lost. Norvil Lane was still foreman of Three G's—Clayt had made certain of that. Norvil Lane was living here in this house, like the son Warren Gregory wanted him to be. He glanced down at his knuckles and saw the bruises

there and he remembered a night with the heat of a burning cabin searing his tortured lungs. "I didn't come back to start something I couldn't finish," he said. "I came to see your father. I'm moving cows into the Basin."

She looked at him. In the gathering darkness he couldn't be sure, but it was almost as if he had seen his own memories in her eyes and now he was watching them fade. "Is that all?" she said.

"That's all," he said. "Where's your dad?"

He saw the flare of her nostrils, the tilt of her chin. There was a lot of the Gregory stubbornness in her. "In the front room," she said, and she stepped aside.

He brushed by her, feeling her nearness, and he hurried up the walk and onto the front porch. For a second he hesitated, gathering his determination, knowing this was the moment he had planned for. Then he went through the door and into the darkened living room. He stood with feet wide-spaced, his face drawn into a hard mask, and then he saw the man in the wheel chair.

For a second he was so startled that he did not recognize Warren Gregory. It was impossible to think of Warren Gregory in a wheel chair, but he was there. The man was old and bent and gray. He sat huddled in the chair, a robe drawn around his shoulders, and his hands were like claws where they gripped the wheels of the chair. His hands moved and the chair half turned into the light. The old man stared at Clayt Winston with all the old arrogance. "Another vulture come to pick at my eyes," Warren Gregory said. "I run you off once, didn't I?"

The voice was the same—arrogant, sure, demanding. Sickness had eaten away at the old man, but it had not touched his attitude, an attitude born of success torn out by the roots with bare hands and a gun when need be. He sat there, his chin jutting, his white mustache bristling the way Clayt remembered it. Warren Gregory was still king of the Three G's and he was still king of his daughter's fate.

"I'm back," Clayt Winston said.

"To farm or to take my daughter?" the old man said. There was a challenge in his voice.

"Neither," Clayt Winston said. "To run cows in the Basin."

"It'll take a whole man to do that," Warren Gregory said, "not a half man."

"I'm standing on my two feet," Clayt said. "You're not. How does it feel?"

He saw the flush climb into Warren Gregory's cheeks. "I don't measure a man by his legs," Warren Gregory said. "I measure him by what he does. A man who scratches the ground for a crop ought to do it where a crop will grow. The Basin is cow country."

"I told you I brought cows," Clayt Winston said. "Five hundred of 'em. I'll need the whole Basin this time."

"You'll have a hell of a time holding it," Warren Gregory said. "You better learn how to use that gun you're packing."

"I've learned," Clayt said.

"Then maybe we'll be seeing each other again," Warren Gregory said. He wheeled his chair abruptly and the interview was over and somehow Warren Gregory had had the last word. Clayt turned and nearly collided with Connie.

She was standing there watching him, her eyes puzzled. She said, "Clayt, listen. Things have changed. Norvil and I are running Three G's. . . ."

Perhaps anything she had said at this moment would have been the wrong thing. Certainly the mention of Norvil Lane was. "You don't owe me an explanation," Clayt said, and he tugged his hat down and pushed by her and went out to his horse. He glanced back once and saw her standing on the porch, looking after him, and for one fleeting second he felt like a schoolboy. He could have at least told her he hoped she was happy with Norvil Lane. But it would

have been a lie, he told himself savagely. He didn't wish her happiness with anyone but himself. His horse jumped under his spurs.

HE TOOK the trail back across the hills to the Basin, intending to bypass the town and get back to his cattle, which were being held by three Mexican vaqueros he had brought up from Texas. He had chosen his crew well. They were top hands with cows, they liked a fight for the sake of the excitement, and they didn't ask questions.

The moon came up when he was at the top of the hill and it lay in a yellow blanket across the bench where he had often met Connie. For a moment the old memories were on him and he remembered how she had always talked to him, encouraging him, telling him he would be well. She would have married him then if he had wanted it, but he couldn't allow it. His pride wouldn't let him. Warren Gregory was always there between them and always would be. Warren Gregory wanted the best for his daughter and Warren Gregory had decided what was best. He wanted a cattle man like Norvil Lane, a man who could take over the Three G's. Well, he had it. Connie had just said that she and Lane were running Three G's.

The moonlight was thick with memories, and once it would have been a beautiful night. Once he had believed in love. He no longer did. Marriage was a business proposition and Norvil Lane was a better risk than an unproven Clayt Winston. He thought of Lorraine Fortuna marrying Mike Ringold and it served to confirm his new belief. The confusion of his thoughts tumbled in Clayt Winston's mind and became clear only when he thought of moving his cows into the Basin, relishing the thought of the fight he knew it would take to hold them there.

Now he could scoff at his old dreams of peace. They had even talked of vines and roses and curtains at the windows, he and Connie, sitting there on the level spot at the side of the hill. He glanced toward the bench and reined up sharply. There was a horse there, reins trailing. He loosened the gun in its holster and rode carefully that way. He saw the woman standing there in the moonlight.

It was as if it were Connie waiting there for him, and a stabbing thrill ran through him, so strong was the illusion. Then he saw the black hair, the outline of the woman's form. It was Lorraine Ringold. She stood there waiting for him, just as if she had expected him, and behind her the lush expanse of the Basin lay in the flood of moonlight, rimmed by the hills that stood between the Basin and Slash R. She looked up and he saw her smile. "I thought you'd be here," she said. "I wanted to see you."

"Why?" he said flatly.

She made a small gesture with her hand. "Perhaps I'm lonesome."

"You're married," he said.

"Marriage doesn't always keep a woman from being lonesome," she said. "You should know that."

He dismounted and let his reins trail. Standing there near her in the moonlight he was again aware of her strong attraction. He rolled a cigarette and gazed out over the Basin, the land that was to be his. He turned toward her suddenly. "I'm moving into that Basin," he said. "I told you before, I hope I get along with your husband."

"Mike?" She shrugged her shoulders. "Mike gets along with everyone. It's like a sickness with him."

"Maybe it's a good sickness to have," he said. "I never caught it."

It seemed to him that she had moved closer to him and now he caught an illusive perfume that lifted above the scent of the dry grass. "I told you in town," she said, and her voice was throaty, "I like a man who can carry a grudge. That's the only kind of a man who gets any place."

"Mike hasn't any grudge to carry."

"I have," she said. "Against Warren Gregory, just as you have."

"That's fine," Clayt said. "You handle your grudge, I'll handle mine."

"The lone wolf," she said, and she was smiling. "One against the world."

"I can trust myself," he said.

"You're bitter, Clayt," she said.

"I never thought of you as the soul of sweetness," he said.

IT DIDN'T anger her. She touched his arm. "You start with bitterness," she said. "I tried it for years. But sooner or later you have to get smart."

"And marry Mike Ringold for what little money he has, is that it?"

She still showed no anger. "Why not?" she said. "I have better clothes than I've had since my dad went broke. I've got a roof over my head."

She was handing him his own philosophy and he didn't like the sound of it. "But you want more," he said. "Is that it?"

"That's right," she said. "Only a fool doesn't want more than he has."

"What do you want?" he said.

"The Three G's," she said flatly. She had said what she wanted to say, bluntly, without pretense, and Clayt felt a strange mixture of admiration and disgust. Here was a woman who had made up her mind, just as he had made up his. There was to be no emotion involved with her and that was what he had decided it would be with him. And yet he didn't like the sound of it. It was like his own conscience speaking to him out of another body.

"Where does that leave me?" he asked curiously.

She was close to him now and her hand squeezed his arm, and it was as if there were fire in her fingertips. A breeze stirred the perfume that had tantalized his nostrils. "That's up to you," she said. "I'm not one to forget a good turn."

He shook his head. "If I kill Warren Gregory it won't be for you."

"Wouldn't it, Clayt?" she said. Her hand was back on his arm and now the fingers searched along his sleeve and she had moved so that she was in front of him, looking up at him. He saw her lips, parted, and he knew that there was smoldering fire in her eyes. Her hand moved across his shoulder and touched his neck and her lips were close to his cheek. "Sometimes I'm sorry I married a man so much older than myself," she said.

The fierce drive of loneliness seized Clayt then. His arms went around her and he pressed her close, crushing her with his strength, and his lips found hers. He felt the burning fire that was in her, and for one flashing moment the world stood still in a crazy blaze of light that blinded him, and then he pushed her away. She stood there, smiling at him. "You're quite a man, Clayt Winston," she said. "Quite a man. I thought you would be."

The reaction was swift. He thought of old Mike Ringold, the man who had been most friendly to him during his stay here, and he cursed himself for a fool. He started to turn but Lorraine gripped his arm and stood close to him. Her voice reached out and carressed him, reminding him of the fire in her lips. "You and I could whip Warren Gregory, Clayt."

"I saw him a half hour ago," Clayt said. He was beginning to feel disgust with himself now, even while the tremble of his emotion was still in him. "He don't look like he'd be hard to whip."

"Warren Gregory is just a name," she said. "How about Norvil Lane? Norvil Lane and Connie?" There was venom in her voice now. "Norvil and Connie will carry on after the old man's dead because she's his daughter and Norvil Lane will be his son-in-law."

"I'll tromp my own snakes," Clayt said.

"You will," she said, "but why should you? We could do it together." He felt her fingers digging into his arm. "We could have everything, Clayt, and you'd even

the score with Connie. You'd like that."

"We were talking about cows and land," Clayt snapped.

She laughed. "You forget that I know men, Clayt. You didn't come back here just to run cows and whip Gregory. You came back here to show Connie she had chosen the wrong man."

THE disgust he had felt turned to sudden anger, just as it had when Dad Berkshire had faced him with the same fact. "You make a pretty speech, lady," he said. "It don't concern me."

"It could," she said, and now there was no doubt of her meaning. She had put her arms around his neck and she was pulling him toward her. "It could concern you a lot."

He pushed her away roughly. He had complete control of himself now. "I don't steal a man's cows or his wife," he said brusquely. "You've had your evening's fun. Go on back to Mike. And from here on, stay out of my way."

The savageness of her slap startled him. Her fingers stung across his cheek and the track of them was vivid in the moonlight. "You're a fool," she said flatly. "As big a fool as Mike Ringold and Norvil Lane. Remember I told you that." She ran to her horse, jerked the reins and threw herself into the saddle. He stood there, feeling the sting of her slap, and he heard her riding down the trail at a full gallop. In time he mounted his own horse and rode slowly down the trail.

He was down in the Basin on the main road when he saw the three riders coming toward him When he noticed them again there were only two. He thought little of it. A couple of men from Warren Gregory's large crew returning home, probably. He supposed the now missing third rider to be one of the Slash R men who had turned off the road heading across the hill. He rode straight on toward the two horsemen and he saw them part so that he would have to ride between them. The moonlight was bright and it would have been useless to turn off the road across the grassy flats even if he had wanted to avoid the riders. There were only a few clumps of juniper large enough to conceal a horse. The riders were a hundred yards away now and a sudden dryness came into Clayt's mouth. He hadn't expected it to happen so soon. One of those riders was Rip Goforth.

Clayt reined up sharply, his hand going for his gun. The voice behind him froze him. It was Kelly's voice. The ex-gambler rose up out of the grass beside the road. He had a gun in his hand. "Just take it easy, clodhopper," Kelly said. "I think Rip wants to talk to you."

He saw Rip Goforth and the other rider spur their mounts into a trot. They rode on toward him and now he could see the savage grin on Rip Goforth's face. Clayt glanced at the second rider. It was no one he knew, but he would remember the long, horsy face, the shoulder-length hair. This man too held a gun.

Rip Goforth dismounted slowly, almost wearily. He walked toward Clayt's horse and stood there, his feet spread. He spat on his hands then and rubbed the rough palms together. "Get down, clodhopper," he said to Clayt. "Norvil Lane tells me he'd like to have you worked over a bit. Says he don't want you hangin' around his lady friend." The big man hitched his belt. "And this time don't figure on surprising me, because it won't work."

CHAPTER FOUR

Stomped!

HE HEARD Rip Goforth's voice, arrogant, sure, and he heard Kelly's short laugh. The third man sat there, hunched in his saddle as if this didn't concern him at all. "You heard the man," Kelly said. "Get down."

Rip was standing near Clayt's horse, standing there waiting, and the moonlight outlined the seams of his heavy face and showed the brutal satisfaction that was on it. Clayt kicked his right foot free of the stirrup and started to dismount. When his leg was halfway across the saddle he kicked down savagely, digging his spur into his horse's back. The animal lunged straight at Rip and as Rip threw up his arm and jumped aside Clayt pushed himself from the saddle and lit spread-eagled on Rip Goforth.

Rip hit the ground hard with Clayt on top of him. For one second Clayt had the upper hand and then he felt the impact of Kelly's boot against his ribs. He twisted, trying to catch Kelly's foot, and Kelly's pointed boot caught him in the face. He rolled and now Rip was on top, smashing him with wicked blows, driving the breath from his body.

Clayt fought back, but he didn't have a chance. The world exploded red and hazy around him. He felt himself being jerked to his feet. He still tried to fight, but now it was as if his fists were sinking into a soft pillow and he had no strength in his arms. "Get ahold of him," he heard Rip Goforth say.

He saw Rip's face, inches in front of his own, and he saw the blood running from the corner of the big man's mouth. Clayt felt himself being jerked savagely, first one side and then the other. He realized Kelly had one of his arms and now the other rider had dismounted and was holding him from the other side.

They held him that way, pulling on his arms, nearly jerking them out of their sockets, and he saw Rip Goforth moving toward him, his fists doubled. "I want you to know why you're getting this beating, clodhopper," Rip Goforth said. "Warren Gregory don't like you. Warren wants you to stay away from his girl. You got that

The belle of the swing shift tolled me off!
HOW ABOUT EATING OUT OF MY LUNCH BOX, HONEY?
YOU'D SPOIL MY APPETITE IN THOSE FADED, SHRUNKEN DUDS. GET HEP! GET WORK CLOTHES MADE OF PEPPERELL FABRICS!
NEXT WEEK
I'M SURE GLAD YOU ASKED ME FOR LUNCH AGAIN, BILL! YOU LOOK LIKE A MILLION! AND PEPPERELL FABRICS MAKE WORK CLOTHES LONGER-WEARING, TOO!
PEPPERELL
FABRICS
When you buy work clothes, look for this fabrics label.
Pepperell Manufacturing Company, Boston, Massachusetts

straight, clodhopper?" The fist smashed and it felt as if someone had poured a bucket of scalding water down Clayt's face.

Rip was slapping him now and he kept repeating, over and over, that thing about Warren Gregory, until it became a dirge dinning in Clayt's ears—a dirge that he would never forget. They were beating him half to death, but he wouldn't die, he knew. Somehow he'd live and he'd get Warren Gregory. There was no longer any doubt in his mind, any question as to right or wrong or what he was fighting. Even the thought of Connie was driven completely from his mind. Warren Gregory, Norvil Lane. Norvil Lane, Warren Gregory. Those were the only two names he could remember now. At this moment he felt no hatred toward Rip Goforth and Kelly. They were merely tools of Warren Gregory and Norvil Lane. Tools to be broken so that they could not be used again. He felt the hot darkness close in around him. He felt himself falling. It was the glow of a fire in his eyes that brought him around.

A man was hunkered by the fire. He was a tall man, well built. The man moved and stood up, and Clayt saw the dark shirt, the holstered gun and the broad shoulders. Then the man turned and the moonlight was across his features. The man stood there looking down at Clayt Winston stretched out on the ground and all the hatred that had been dinning through his head exploded in Clayt and surged life through his body. He rolled, trying to get to his feet, and his hand clawed at his empty holster. He felt the boot against his chest pushing him back to the ground. "Take it easy, you fool," Norvil Lane said. "You're half dead already."

"I'll kill you," Clayt Winston said. "If it's the last thing I do, I'll kill you."

"I'm scared to death of you," Norvil Lane said.

Again that seething drive of hatred flowed through Clayt Winston and this time he managed to get to his knees. "Give me a gun," he said. "Give me a gun if you've got guts enough."

"You make me sick, Winston," Norvil Lane said. "You've got a one-track mind, and a poor track at that."

"Why didn't you have guts enough to come after me yourself?" Clayt said. "Why do you always have to send Rip and Kelly?"

"I could answer that," Norvil Lane said, "but you wouldn't believe me. You've already made up your mind about all the answers, so go ahead and use 'em. Here." He had produced a canteen and now he handed it across to Clayt.

CLAYT shoved the canteen aside, spilling the water. "I wouldn't take anything from you, Lane. Not even a drink of water."

Norvil Lane shrugged and corked the canteen. "Go to hell then," he said. "It don't make a damn to me."

"You better finish me off while you've got the chance," Clayt Winston said. "Because if you don't I'll finish you. You and Warren Gregory both. I'm still gonna move my cows into the Basin."

"Don't expect me to help you," Norvil Lane said.

"I expect only one thing from you," Clayt said. "I expect you to give me a chance at you, man to man, without somebody holding my arms."

"All right," Norvil Lane said tiredly. "I'll give you that." He moved out of the rim of firelight and Clayt heard him mounting a horse. He rode back then and Clayt saw him there, looking down, a handsome man a year or so older than Clayt, a man who seemed suddenly tired and much older than his years. Norvil Lane leaned across his saddle horn. "Listen to me, Winston," he said, "and listen careful. I don't want to kill you because I'd have to live with it a long time and Connie would have to live with it. As far as you moving your cows

into the Basin, go ahead. Once they get there it's your problem how you're gonna keep 'em there. But if you ever hurt Connie I'll kill you fast. Remember that."

"Leave her out of it," Clayt said.

"I wish we could, Winston," Lane said. "She's not that kind of girl. So since we can't leave her out, just remember I'll kill you if you hurt her."

"That'll work both ways, Lane," Clayt said.

Norvil Lane reached behind him and opened a saddle bag. When his hand came up it was holding a gun. He sat there a moment, weighing the gun in his hand, and then he tossed it toward Clayt Winston. "It's yours," he said. "I found it laying by you. It's loaded, I guess. Why don't you shoot me in the back and then explain that to Connie?"

Clayt's hand reached out and gripped the gun. For a second he held it there, leveled at Norvil Lane, and then he saw Lane rein his horse and ride away, slowly, and Lane's back was fully exposed, his shoulders wide. The blood was caked thick on Clayt's face and now the perspiration came and ran into his mouth. He thought of Connie, and slowly his fingers relaxed and the gun dropped to the ground. He sat there then and stared at the fire and in time he was violently sick.

He felt better after that and he forced himself to get to his feet and walk around. There were no bones broken, but every muscle in his body ached and there was a lump on his ribs where Kelly had kicked him. His nose was swollen, possibly broken, and his face was a mask of his own dried blood. He kept walking, trying to work the stiffness out of his muscles and joints. He found a dead juniper and broke some limbs and added them to the fire and he watched the moon go down. Dawn came to take its trembling place in the east and the hills were momentarily sharp and beautifully blue. A thin ground fog lay across the basin in uncertain strips and the tops of the cottonwoods protruded through the fog, black conical islands in the mist.

Clayt found his horse and mounted, and he rode through the low fog toward the river. There he stripped off all his clothes and plunged into the icy water. He came up gasping for breath, stunned with cold, but the shock of the water had revived him.

He climbed out on the grassy bank and, using his shirt for a towel, rubbed himself vigorously. It was unsatisfactory and he wasn't completely dry, but a gradual warmth started returning. He dressed then, and from behind his saddle he took his mackinaw and put it on, using it for both a shirt and a jacket.

His immediate concern now was his cattle and the vaqueros who were waiting for him with the herd. He would have to get back to them and get the cattle moving before Norvil Lane decided to strike again. The cattle were trail broken and quiet, but a few pistol shots or a blanket waved at them could still stampede them.

Clayt mounted and turned his horse, and he saw the single rider coming up the road from town. The rider was a tall man who rode loose in the saddle. He was leading a pack horse, meagerly loaded. Clayt drew his gun. He reloaded it and dropped it back into the holster and then he sat there and waited. The man with the pack horse saw Clayt. He lifted one hand in greeting and turned that way. It was old Dad Berkshire.

THERE was enough easy arrogance about Dad Berkshire to irritate a man. It was about him now, and Clayt, seeing it, felt quick rebellion building inside him. The news of Clayt's beating was probably all over the valley and the town of Seco by now, and likely as not Dad Berkshire had ridden out of his way to hurl a few of his pointed barbs. The devil with him, Clayt thought. I'll stop him before he gets started.

Clayt stood there waiting and when Dad

Berkshire had reined up Clayt said, "You want something from me?"

Dad Berkshire folded his long, thin, gunman's hands on his saddle horn. He leaned forward and grinned and spat between his horse's ears. "Not particularly," he said. "Just wondered if you'd learned anything yet."

"I know what I need to know," Clayt said. He had spread his damp shirt out on the grass. He picked it up, rolled it and twisted the water out of it, and put it in his saddle bag.

"Don't forget and leave that shirt in there," Dad Berkshire said. "It'll mildew like an old grudge mildews in time. In time you won't even remember it was a shirt." The old man's eyes were boring into Clayt. "But then I reckon you know that," Dad said. "You know everything."

Clayt had one foot in the stirrup. He stepped down. "What do you mean by that?" he said.

"It's a compliment, I think," Dad Berkshire said. "It's supposed to make a man feel good to tell him he knows everything. Only trouble is, sometimes a man knows so much he don't know nothing. That's the difference between a man who asks questions and a damn fool."

"You didn't ride out here to make riddles," Clayt said. "The sun's up now. You can get a good look at me." He turned his face so that the light was on the wicked bruises, the swollen nose and the fast-discoloring eye. "Rip Goforth beat hell out of me, just like he did before. Go on back to town now and tell 'em I look worse than I did the first time." The hot anger was a lump in his chest. "And you can tell 'em I'm still here. My cows will be in the Basin tomorrow morning." He started to mount again and had a second thought. "And since you're out this way, ride on over to Three G's and tell Warren Gregory that his future son-in-law can still do a fine job of getting a man beat up. Gregory like that.

"You and your big, fat pride," Dad Berkshire said. "And your big, fat head to go with it."

"Don't give me too many compliments," Clayt said. "I might get the swell head."

"I've found," Dad said, "that there has to be something inside a man's head before it will start swelling."

"You should have been a poet or something," Clayt said. "You should have shared your ideas with the world."

"The world don't deserve it," Dad Berkshire said. "There's too much so-called pride that turns out to be damn stubbornness."

"Don't worry about it," Clayt said. "I'll do all right."

"Sure," Dad said. "You'll do just fine." His hand lifted the reins and he jerked on the lead rope of the pack animal. "You've seen Warren Gregory, I take it?"

"And I'll see him again," Clayt said.

"What about Connie?" The old man's eyes were eagle sharp.

"She's old enough to make up her own mind," Clayt said. "I reckon she already has."

Dad Bershire shook his head. "All right, Clayt," he said. "But the next time you come riding onto Three G range, come riding like a gentleman. I'm going to work for Warren Gregory at Three G's this morning."

Clayt kept the surprise out of his eyes and out of his voice. "That'll make quite a gun crew," he said. "You and Norvil Lane and Rip Goforth and Kelly."

"Wrong again," Dad Berkshire said. "Just me and Norvil Lane. We can handle anything that comes up. Including you, if we have to."

"I'm complimented," Clayt said, "being threatened by you. But how come you ain't letting Goforth and Kelly in on the fun?"

Dad Berkshire stared hard at the younger man and it was almost as if he were trying to read something on Clayt's face,

and then it was as if he had read something and was disappointed in what he read. "You could have found out all about Goforth and Kelly," Dad said, "if you hadn't been too damn stubborn to ask a few questions. You come riding into town with a one-track mind, drawing your own conclusions. I could have set you straight, but you told me to shut up the first time I opened my mouth. This much I'll tell you, Winston. Rip Goforth and Kelly haven't worked for Warren Gregory since the day after they burned you out. Beyond that, get your own damn answers, you stubborn jackass, and I hope you find them all out the hard way."

The old man's eyes were tired, tired with disappointment.

Rebellion was tinged with shame in Clayt Winston. "I'll make my own answers," he mumbled.

"I'll tell Connie you said so," Dad said, and there was sarcasm in his voice. "And when you see Lorraine Ringold you can tell her for me I'd as soon shoot a woman as not." He rode off down the trail that led to the Three G's, and Clayt stood there a while, watching him, knowing the old man had wanted to be friendly, cursing the stubbornness that had kept him from being friendly. Then he mounted and cut across the Basin toward the saddle that led to Mike Ringold's Slash R and beyond to the valley where the vaqueros were holding the herd.

To hell with all of them, he decided. He had come here determined to play a lone hand and that was the way he was going to play it. If Rip Goforth and Kelly were no longer working for Three G's, then they were probably in for themselves. Probably running their own brand in the Basin, he decided. That thought satisfied him. It would be a pleasure to run Rip and Kelly out of the Basin. As for the fight between Slash R and Three G's, let them fight it out.

To hell with them all.

CHAPTER FIVE

Queen of Dead Man's Basin

THE sun climbed the sky and was hot through his mackinaw. He reached back and took his still-damp shirt from the saddle bag. Knotting the sleeves, he slipped the loop of them around his neck and let the shirt hang down his back like a cape. In less than a half hour it was dry and he reined up and dismounted and started shrugging his way out of his coat.

He was standing there awkwardly, his arms caught in the sleeves, when the riders came out of the scrub oak thicket and stopped short, surprised at finding him here. It was Mike Ringold, and the man with him was the long-haired, horse-faced individual Clayt had recognized riding with Rip Goforth and Kelly last night. For a moment Clayt hesitated, and then he shrugged on out of his coat and stood there, his chest and shoulders bare, a well-muscled man, his skin a startling white below the neckline of his shirt and above his cuffs. "Hello, Mike," Clayt said finally. "Long time no see."

"Lorraine told me you was back," Mike Ringold said. Clayt felt a quick twinge of guilt at mention of Lorraine's name. He grinned at the old man, not feeling the grin.

Mike was around sixty-five, but time had been rough with him. He was a small man, bent and hammered down by lean years. His face was seamed and tired, and the drooping mustache that had once been full and luxurious was stained and stringy. He owned a fine property in Slash R, but he had never been overly successful with it. There was always a bewildered air about Mike; it was even more obvious than Clayt had remembered. He kept staring at the bruises on Clayt's face and at the long, purple lump on Clayt's ribs. "I figgered maybe you'd had enough of trouble, Clayt," Mike said

Clayt kept staring steadily at the long-haired, horse-faced man who rode with Mike Ringold. The long-haired one stared back with muddy, expressionless eyes. He wore a gun in a tied-down holster, and a greasy calfskin vest with the hair turned in. His trousers were striped, the type often seen on Texas riders, and he wore them tucked inside his knee-length boots. "Who's your friend, Mike?" Clayt said, jerking his head toward the rider.

Mike rubbed his finger under his nose and ducked his head uneasily. He glanced at the rider as if asking for permission to speak and then he said, "This here is Jim Smith." The old man looked at Clayt, trying to tell Clayt something with his eyes. "Help's damn hard to get, Clayt."

"Must be," Clayt said. "Seems to me I've seen Jim Smith somewhere before."

The long-haired man's expressionless eyes held Clayt. "You're mistaken, Winston," Jim Smith said.

"It don't matter," Clayt said. "If I have seen you someplace, I'll remember where when the time comes."

"Let me know if you figger it out," Jim Smith said.

"Sure," Clayt said. "I'll let you know." He stood there, apparently unconcerned, and shook the wrinkles out of his shirt and put it on, loosening his belt, tucking in the shirt tail, buttoning the garment carefully.

"You still gonna move your cows into the Basin, Clayt?" Mike Ringold said.

"I'm movin' 'em tomorrow," Clayt said. "Why?"

Mike Ringold seemed eager. "I figgered maybe I could give you a hand with 'em," he said. "I'd like to ride along with you."

"Your wife said you was to help *me*, didn't she?" Jim Smith said. His voice was flat and hard. He didn't look at Mike or Clayt.

Clayt saw the color flood Mike Ringold's cheeks. The old man's laugh was thin and nervous. "Beats hell how a woman can order a man around," he said. He laughed again. A pitiful sound, Clayt thought, and he no longer felt so guilty about the swift interlude he had had with Lorraine. The man that stole Mike Ringold's wife would be doing Mike a favor.

"Thanks anyway, Mike," Clayt said. "I'll make out all right." He hoped he had conveyed the message that he knew Mike was in trouble.

"Let's go," Jim Smith said.

"Yeah," Mike Ringold said. "Let's go." He licked his lips. "Well, good-bye, Clayt. See you in hell, I reckon." Clayt saw Jim Smith's eyes dart back and forth from Mike to Clayt, and now Clayt knew for sure. Mike Ringold was being forced to make this ride. Mike glanced back, a small, old man, and Clayt saw the pleading message in Mike's eyes. Clayt waved his hand, trying again to tell Mike he had caught the signal. He saw Jim Smith lash out with his long reins, slapping Mike's horse into a run.

Mike Ringold's domestic troubles were none of his business, Clayt told himself, but he couldn't ignore the terror, the pleading, he had seen in the old man's eyes. Clayt had promised himself he would play a lone hand and let every man fight his own battles, but watching Mike he had the feeling that this would be the last time he ever saw the old man unless he did something quick. He waited until they were out of sight, and then he spurred his horse and circled back around the knoll, cutting through the live oak, riding fast through a little draw and then doubling back onto the trail where he would have a chance to intercept Mike and Jim Smith.

HE STOPPED in a clump of oak at the side of the trail and in a moment he heard the two horses moving down the trail toward him. Jim Smith was talking and his voice was loud. "You damn near slipped up, old man," Jim Smith said. "You want to watch that."

"Turn me loose," Mike pleaded. "I won't cause you no trouble. Take the damn ranch. Kill off Warren Gregory and anybody else you find, I don't give a damn. Just turn me loose. Just let me get away from that woman."

"Stick around," the man called Jim Smith said. "Just wait until the clodhopper gets his cows into the Basin. It'll save us the trouble of drivin' 'em there. We got to be cagey, old man. There's too much stink around here already It would be best if the clodhopper got the blame for any hell that's raised."

"I'll keep my mouth shut," Mike Ringold pleaded. "Just turn me loose and I'll leave the country."

"Shut up," Jim Smith said. "I can't stand much more of your bellerin'. I don't know why in hell Rip don't let me finish you off . . ." The voice trailed off as Clayt Winston drew his gun and rode his horse into the trail directly behind the two riders just as Jim Smith and Mike Ringold passed by him no more than twenty feet away.

At the sound of Clayt's horse Jim Smith jerked his reins. The gunman's horse reared and Jim Smith's hand streaked to his gun. He fired twice, but his plunging horse spoiled his aim, and then he was out of the saddle, jerking the horse around for a shield. Mike Ringold, taken by surprise, was directly in the line of fire between Smith and Clayt. The old man saw his position, gave a squeal of terror and dove for Smith's legs.

Clayt heard Smith's curse, saw him kick at Ringold. The horse broke loose and Smith was standing there, his gun in his hand, kicking savagely at Ringold who clung to his leg like a terrier. Clayt saw the gun swing toward Ringold and it was then Clayt fired. The gun in Smith's hand exploded and Mike Ringold released his grip on the gunman's leg. Clayt fired again and he saw Smith staggering backwards, saw him fall.

Clayt rushed over to where Mike Ringold was lying. The old man rolled over and his face was white with terror. "I'm kilt, Clayt," he said. "I'm a goner."

Swiftly Clayt ripped open the old man's shirt. His fingers searched deftly for some sign of blood. There was none. He nudged the old man with his boot toe. "Get up," he said. "You're all right."

"I'll swear I'm kilt, Clayt," Ringold said, "and I don't give a damn. I can't take no more of it."

Clayt jerked the old man to his feet. "I said, get up!"

The last trace of color left the old man's face. "You're workin' for her too! You killed Warren Gregory, just like she figgered you would! She didn't dare have it done herself because the law was startin' to watch her too close."

A flash of hatred drove some of the fear from the old man's eyes. "You're a fool, Clayt! She'll use you just the way she used me. She'll sweet-talk and butter you until you get them cows of yours in the Basin, and then she'll get rid of you and nobody will give a damn because everybody knows you come here lookin' for trouble. She'll get rid of you just like she was gonna get rid of me. She's a crazy woman, I tell you!" The old man broke down completely. He sank to the ground and started to cry like a baby. "How can anybody as sweet and beautiful as she is be like that?" he sobbed. "How can she kiss you and love you one minute and plan to have you killed the next?"

Clayt gripped the old man's shirt and jerked him to his feet. Everything was beginning to make sense now and it was only his own blind desire for revenge that had kept him from seeing it. He held Mike close and shook him. "Are Rip Goforth and Kelly working for you?" he demanded.

"Me?" the old man said. "Nobody's workin' for me. I ain't got a damn thing left. She took it all."

"And Norvil Lane?" Clayt demanded.

"What's the truth about Norvil Lane?"

Mike Ringold stared at the younger man and now there was bitterness in his eyes and there was confusion and shame. "So you know about that?" Mike said. "All right, I was a fool. Everybody knew it but me. Sure, she was in love with Norvil Lane. I knew she was seeing him. But I'm an old man and I could afford to wait. I figgered she'd come back to me and she did, but it's cost me everything I ever had and now she's after Three G's and she'll get you too. You think you can hang onto her and make her love you, but you can't. She's still in love with Norvil Lane!"

"That's all I wanted to know," Clayt said tightly. He stood there and watched Mike stumble over to his horse, avoiding looking at the dead man who had called himself Jim Smith. Clayt didn't try to stop Mike. He saw the old man pull himself into the saddle and spur the horse down the trail toward town.

So that was the way of it. Norvil Lane and Lorraine Ringold, plotting together to take the Three G's and Slash R both. And if Clayt had fallen into the trap he would probably right now be charged with the murder of Warren Gregory, or, more likely, he would have been the victim of an ambush laid by a self-appointed posse. You're a smart one, Lorraine, he thought to himself, but not smart enough. Without another look at the man he had killed he mounted his horse and rode at a full run up toward the saddle that led across to Slash R headquarters. He was sure he would find Rip Goforth and Kelly there; he was hoping Norvil Lane would be there too.

SLASH R lay in a pocket at the dead end of two canyons. From here on the hill, Clayt could look directly down on the headquarters and onto the trails that led up the two canyons. He saw three horses tied at the hitch rail in front of the house and he saw the two riders coming up the south canyon from the direction of the Basin. He would ride the north canyon in. The riders were too far away for him to recognize who they were; he didn't much care.

The picture of Warren Gregory in a wheel chair kept getting in Clayt's way as he rode down toward the ranch and it was a picture that was no longer tainted with hatred. He couldn't hate a man who was sick, for he had been a sick man too long himself. Neither could he forgive Warren Gregory, but he could, grudgingly, see what Warren Gregory's position had been.

Gregory had come to this country when it was wild, when he had had to fight for everything he wanted, when Indians slaughtered his beef and stole his horses. Twenty years of that and a man could get in the habit of riding roughshod over everything and demanding to see the toughness of a man. Especially would he want to see the fiber of a man who wanted to marry Connie. Clayt felt a grim smile tugging his lips. So Warren Gregory had chosen Norvil Lane as the man to marry Connie, and now Norval Lane had turned to destroy his benefactor. It was a rough form of justice.

To Clayt's right was the long, low ridge separating the canyons. He could no longer see the two riders who were heading for Slash R, but he did see a single horseman come into momentary view on the ridge. The horseman spurred his mount and disappeared out of sight, taking a hidden trail, apparently, down toward the Slash R headquarters. The trail Clayt rode dipped and he was out of sight of the ranch house. When he could see the house again he was nearly there. The horses were gone from the hitch rail.

He rode on in, carefully, his hand near his gun, trusting that they wouldn't fire on him, figuring they would want to hear what he had to say. He realized now that the beating he had received last night had been ordered by Lorraine Ringold. It could have accomplished one of two purposes, or possibly both, and Lorraine would

want to know. It could have fired Clayt's temper to where he would have killed Warren Gregory. Or it could have convinced him that he should join up with Lorraine. He rode into the ranch yard unchallenged and he saw the girl there on the porch.

She was wearing the dress she had worn that day in town. Her hair was perfectly groomed and she was wearing pendant jade earrings. She smiled when she saw Clayt and he thought of a cat—soft, beautifully sleek, wickedly dangerous and never quite tamed. She said, "I was expecting company, but not you."

"Norvil Lane?" he said.

"How did you know?"

"I've been checking on your love life," he said. He looped his reins over the hitch rail and took off his hat and recreased it. "Your boys gave me quite a beating," he said.

"It was your own fault," she said. "I told you last night you were a fool."

"I suppose," he said. "Rip and Kelly around?"

"They will be," she said. She was still smiling and there was a tantalizing, lurking challenge in her eyes. "You fascinate me, Clayt," she said. "I still think you and I could get along."

"Up to a point, maybe," Clayt said. "After that there'd be a Jim Smith to take me for a ride to town."

That startled her. For just a second the composure was gone and then she was smiling again. "I never throw away good food or fine furnishings, Clayt," she said. "Just worn-out equipment."

HE STEPPED up on the porch and as he did so he drew his gun. She glanced at the weapon and the smile turned to a smirk. "Going hunting?" she said.

"That's right," he said. "For Rip Goforth and Kelly and Norvil Lane. I already got your boy Jim Smith." He cocked the gun. "And by the way, your husband is well and sends his love. He was heading for town the last time I saw him. I reckon he'll do a lot of talking."

Some of the color had drained from her face. "You're quite a man, aren't you, Clayt Winston?" she said.

"So you told me last night," he said. He pushed open the door and went inside. The house was empty. She had moved in behind him and now she stood there and he could feel her eyes on his back. He said, "Expecting the boys back soon?"

"I'm expecting Norvil soon," she said.

"And you were going to meet him here? Alone?" He clicked his tongue against his teeth. "Shame on you."

"Your concern for my morals is very touching," she said. She had moved around in front of him and she was leaning against a table, her hands behind her. Her pose accented the swell of her breasts, the narrowness of her waistline. She crossed her feet and the fabric of her dress pulled tight over her leg. She was studying Clayt carefully. "You think Norvil and I are in this together, don't you?" she said.

"Pretty obvious, isn't it?" Clayt said. "Of course I was away and didn't get in on all the gossip, but your husband says you and Norvil have been pretty cosy."

Somehow he knew she had made up her mind and he saw the cunning satisfaction that was in her. "There's a rifle there over the mantel," she said. "Why don't you take it and get Norvil when he comes down the trail out of the canyon?"

"That would leave you short a man," he said.

"I'd still have you," she said.

"Always trying, aren't you?" he said.

"That's the only way you get anything," she said.

He pushed open a window and knelt down, his six-shooter cocked. From there he could see across the flat to where the two canyon trails led into the ranch headquarters. As he watched he saw a single horseman ride out of the canyon. It was Norvil Lane. He thought of the two riders

he had seen on that canyon trail and wondered about the second man, but there was no time to speculate further on it. Norvil Lane was dismounting in front of the house and coming up on the porch. "Let him in," Clayt whispered. He saw Lorraine smile and he knew she was laughing at him. She moved across and opened the door.

"I got your message," Norvil Lane said brusquely. "I talked it over with Warren Gregory. The answer is no."

"Too bad," Lorraine said. "It was a good offer—much more than Three G's is worth. Now I'll just have to wait until you and your dear, sweet lady go broke completely, won't I?" She moved aside so that Norvil Lane could see Clayt. "Oh, by the way," she said. "You two have met, haven't you?"

Clayt stood up, the gun in his hand. "Close the door, Norvil," he said.

CHAPTER SIX

Back to Back!

CLAYT stood there, enjoying the stunned expression on Norvil Lane's face. He saw Norvil's hands move away from his sides. "So you're in it with her, are you, Winston?" Norvil Lane said. "I doubted that you actually had guts enough to operate on your own."

"I'm always in it," Clayt said, "where you and Rip and Kelly are concerned. I thought I wanted Warren Gregory, too, but I reckon he's taken enough of a beating to even the score for me."

"I should have killed you this morning," Norvil Lane said.

"I told you to," Clayt said.

"I was thinking of Connie," Norvil Lane said. "Now that I know for sure you're the skunk I thought you were, I won't have to worry about her any more."

Both men had forgotten Lorraine Ringold. She spoke now and they turned and looked at her. She had a cocked small-caliber pistol in her hand and it was covering Clayt Winston. "Well, Norvil?" she said.

Norvil looked from Lorraine to Clayt and there was confusion in his eyes. "Another proposition, Lorraine?" he said.

"The same one," she said. "The only one I'm interested in."

"I should be flattered," Norvil Lane said. "I'm not."

"I'm still in love with you, Norvil," Lorraine said quietly. "I've tried to hate you, but I can't. I married Mike to spite you. I've wrecked Three G's, trying to strike at Connie because she took you away from me."

"And when that didn't work you tried to get Clayt Winston to kill me."

She shook her head. "I told you I loved you, didn't I?" She smiled. "Clayt Winston wouldn't have killed you. He wouldn't have had the chance. I had men watching him all the time. But if he had come after you, and Warren Gregory had been killed somehow . . ." She shrugged her shoulders. "Now it's simple, Norvil. Just tell me you love me the way you once did. I'll forget Three G's. I'll get rid of Goforth and Kelly."

"How about Clayt Winston?" Lane said.

She moved the gun closer to Clayt's chest. "Tell me you love me, Norvil," she said, "and I'll pull this trigger." Her breathing was rapid, her breasts rising and falling.

"And if I say no again?" There was disgust in Norvil Lane's eyes.

"I prepared for that, Norvil," Lorraine Ringold said. "I had to. Rip and Kelly cut in behind you and followed you in. They're out there behind the barn right now. If I call they'll hear me. If I can't have you, neither can any other woman. It would be easier to see you dead than to go on living without you."

Norvil Lane stared at Lorraine Ringold and then his eyes shifted and he was meeting Clayt Winston's gaze. Clayt stood

there, the picture clear now, and Norvil Lane found the answer he wanted in Clayt's eyes. "You were still a damn fool, Clayt," Norvil Lane said. "But so was I. I guess we let our regard for Connie get in the way of our thinking." He turned toward Lorraine Ringold and now a small smile lifted one corner of his lips. "Go to hell, Lorraine dear," he said quietly. "Go to hell and take us with you."

At that second Clayt Winston turned. His fist was doubled and the entire weight of his body was behind the blow. He felt his fist crack against Lorraine Ringold's shoulder and he saw the gun spin from her hand. At the same second he swept his own gun from where he had placed it on the table.

"Is that for me?" Norvil Lane said, nodding toward the gun.

Clayt grinned. "I'm not that big a fool," he said. He picked up Lorraine's gun and handed it to Norvil. "You gave me a gun this morning," he said. "I'll return the favor."

"I've got my own," Norvil Lane said. "You ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Clayt said. "Let's go." He moved across to the window and knocked the glass out with the barrel of his gun. "Rip! Kelly!" he called. "It's Clayt Winston. Me and Norvil Lane are both in here! Come and get us!" He fired twice then and jerked his head toward the back of the room. Lorraine Ringold moaned and tried to set up.

"How about her?" Norvil said.

"She's still a woman," Clayt said.

They picked her up and carried her into the back room just as the guns from the barn opened up.

LEAD shattered the windows of the Slash R ranch house and cut bright splinters from the floor. It thudded into the closed door between the front room and

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

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the kitchen where Norvil Lane, Clayt Winston and Lorraine Ringold waited. Lorraine leaned against a table, her hair in wild disarray now, a purplish bruise on her temple where her head had hit the floor. "Keep firing from here," Clayt said. "I'll slip out back and come around behind them if I can."

"Why you?" Norvil Lane said. "Don't you think I'm good enough to go?"

"I wasn't thinking of you, Lane," Clayt said quietly. "I was thinking of Connie."

For a second the two men looked at each other, realizing that the hatred they had felt for each other had never been hatred at all but rivalry because they both loved the same woman. A slow smile found Norvil Lane's lips and there was a hurt memory in his eyes. "In that case, Winston," he said, "I'm the one that has to go. I've tried to take her away from you for three years. It hasn't worked. She's still waiting for you, so if we get out of this, you go to her. But for God's sake be the man Warren Gregory wanted you to be, Winston. Get the chip off your shoulder and separate your pride from your stubbornness. Just because you had coal dust in your lungs, it doesn't mean the whole world is against you." He punched Clayt on the shoulder the way a friend might.

"And don't be too hard on the old man," he said. "Sure, he ran you out of the Basin. He did it because he didn't think you were the kind of man Connie deserved, and he was right at the time. But he didn't order your cabin burned and he didn't order Rip to beat you half to death. That was Rip's own idea and I would have stopped it, but I didn't get there soon enough." He had backed toward the door as he talked and now he slipped the bolt. Clayt moved to stop him but Norvil Lane shook his head. "I owe Connie something too," he said. "Dad Berkshire is out there some place ready to back me up. I'll make out all right."

The door closed and Clayt turned to face Lorraine Ringold. She was standing there glaring at him, her lips pulled away from her teeth, her hair around her face. He could see the crazy madness in her eyes and suddenly she reached down and ripped her dress away from her shoulder. Her nostrils were flared, her eyes bright.

"I'll win yet," she said. "I know I will!" Her hand moved across her breast and swung out. Clayt saw the small derringer too late. It exploded inches from his body and he felt the hot tear of lead. He staggered back against the wall and now Lorraine was running toward the front room, screaming for Rip and Kelly.

Outside, behind the barn, a rifle snarled and the voice of old Dad Berkshire sounded in a wild rebel yell and was answered by Norvil Lane.

Clayt could hear Lorraine in the front room, smashing things, cursing. He started that way and a rifle bullet punctured the door near his hand. He threw himself back quickly and the rifle inside the room cracked again. Blood was trickling down Clayt's arm and he felt a dizziness growing in him. He moved toward the back door, slid the bolt and stepped out into the air. At that second Rip Goforth and Kelly ran around the house and nearly collided with him.

The gun was still in Clayt's hand and he threw it up and fired at point-blank range. He saw Goforth stagger back under the impact of the lead and then Kelly was there, leveling a gun, a deadly grin on his thin lips. Clayt threw himself to the ground and fired from there, knew he had missed, and he saw Kelly take two steps forward and then throw up his hands. The gun fell from Kelly's fingers and he pitched forward on his face. Dad Berkshire came around the corner of the house, a smoking six-shooter in his hand. "A hell of a gun-fighter you turned out to be, Winston," Dad Berkshire said. "You almost let Kelly get you."

Inside the house they could hear Lor-

raine Ringold laughing, a wild, hysterical, almost an animal sound. And above the laughter was another sound, the sound of horses being ridden fast. Dad and Clayt moved around the house and they saw Norvil Lane standing there, looking up the canyon. A dozen riders were thundering toward the ranch, led by Mike Ringold. At that moment there was the sound of a shot from inside the house, a small, muffled sound, and Clayt remembered the derringer Lorraine Ringold had taken from her bosom. He opened the door and went inside. She was on the floor, the small gun clutched in her hand. For one swift second she was beautiful, and then she was ugly in death.

Afterwards Clayt remembered the stunned silence of the group of men, the weeping of old Mike Ringold. He remembered that it was Norvil Lane who bandaged his wound and held him in the saddle on the way back to the Three G's headquarters. Most of all he remembered

Connie Gregory coming out to meet them, looking at him, looking for an answer, finding it in his eyes. He felt the doctor probing for the small bullet before he let the darkness claim him.

THE sunshine was warm and good on the porch of the Three G's ranch house. Clayt felt the tightness of the bandage on his shoulder and the greater tightness that was in his chest. He glanced across at old Warren Gregory, sitting in his wheel chair, an old man staring out into the past. Clayt wanted to tell the old man that there was no longer any hard feeling, and then he remembered his own struggle back to health and how a fight had been a better tonic than sympathy. He said, "Just because I'm gonna marry your daughter, Gregory, don't think it means I've suddenly fallen in love with you."

"You damn clodhopper," Warren Gregory said "Just because you got a few cows in the Basin don't make you a cattleman."

"I'll outstrip you any time, old-timer," Clayt said. "I'll have a bigger calf crop and have more weight on my beef come spring than you ever saw on your cows."

"You got any money that says so?" Warren Gregory said, jerking his wheel chair around.

"If it ain't so," Clayt said, "I'll brand my whole herd Three G. If it is so, you brand your whole herd with my Running W."

"In either case," the old man said, "we consolidate the herds, is that it?"

"Hadn't thought about it," Clayt said, "but I reckon it would work out that way. Maybe it's just as well, seeing as how I plan to buy Slash R."

"Hmph," the old man said. "Maybe you will get to thinkin' like a cattleman in time. You talk big enough."

Connie came out and put her arm around Clayt and leaned her cheek against his. "You two still fighting?" she said.

Warren Gregory jerked his wheel chair around with a new savageness. "Damned if I know what you see in that clodhopper," he said to his daughter. He turned the chair so that his back was to them and then he glanced cautiously over his shoulder. There was a little glisten of moisture in the old man's eyes and he cleared his throat noisily. "Well," he said to himself, looking out across his land, "I'll have to admit the damn fool kisses like a cowman." ● ● ●

Fighting Man Wanted!

By CLIFTON ADAMS

He was just a little man in a blue-serge suit and a plug hat. What kind of a marshal was this—for a town that needed a fighting man?

Toggleson wished that he could look like young Clay Barnett, with tied-down holsters, and wide-brim hat, and high heels —a real fighting man. . . .

WILLIAM TOGGLESON ate his breakfast of ham and eggs and buttered biscuits while his wife busied herself at the kitchen range. Outside he could hear his son and Clay Barnett's boy playing their violent Saturday morning game of "Outlaw." "Bang, bang!" the Barnett boy yelled shrilly. "You're dead, you're dead!"

Toggleson winced slightly. His wife stepped to the kitchen door and called, "Bobby, stay out of the street!" When she turned, Toggleson saw that she had choked the subject back as long as she could.

"Interviews!" she said, scraping furiously at a skillet. "You ought to be sitting behind the U.S. marshal's desk right now. Old Matt Turner has been wanting to quit for years."

Toggleson finished his breakfast, wiped his mouth neatly with a napkin. "The people have got a say-so in the matter," he answered patiently. "You can't blame them for wanting the best marshal they can get for the Territory."

His wife turned. "You have the best record of anybody in the Oklahoma country. Who else would they get?"

William Toggleson smiled slightly. "My dear, who will be United States marshal is up to the President. However, he is almost certain to appoint the man who has the backing of the citizens of the Territory, and that is why the Citizens Committee was formed, to select the one man."

Mrs. Toggleson sniffed slightly, as if she

still thought it a lot of childish nonsense.

Toggleson adjusted his tie in front of the hall mirror, making it fast to his shirtfront with a small cameo stickpin. He put on his blue-serge coat and black plug hat. At last he took an unorthodox Colt .38 revolver from the bureau drawer and slipped it into his hip pocket. As he stepped onto the front porch the Barnett boy was yelling, "Bang, bang!"

"Here," Toggleson said mildly. "What is this?"

"We're playin' Outlaw," the Barnett boy said. "I'm a fightin' U.S. marshal, like my father."

"I see," Toggleson said thoughtfully. "And what are you, Robert?" He never called his son Bobby. Pet names made him uneasy.

His son busied himself with his wooden pistol, not looking up. "Ah . . . I'm nothin' much, I guess. Come on, Tommy, let's go around to the back."

It was foolish to let a thing like that upset him, Toggleson told himself. But it did. "Well," he said, "don't get into mischief."

HE PAUSED for a moment to inspect the rose bushes set out by his wife a year ago. They were among the first roses in the entire Territory of Oklahoma—a symbol of civilization, Toggleson thought. The thought pleased him for a while, as he walked toward town. Then he began to think again of the U.S. marshal's job.

He wanted that job, there was no denying it. He wanted it for his wife, and for his son. He remembered the Barnett boy saying, "I'm a fightin' marshal, like my father!" Toggleson thought that it must be a fine feeling to have a son so proud of you that he wanted to imitate everything you did. "Now if I got the marshal's job . . ." he thought. "Everybody respects a U.S. marshal."

But there was more to it than that. He caught the reflection of himself in a barber shop window. "Not very imposing," he thought. "Not exactly the kind of figure to inspire hero worship in a small boy." What he saw was an ordinary-looking man of forty-six, slightly smaller than average, wearing a blue-serge suit and a plug hat and shiny button shoes.

"A far cry," he thought, "from the fire-eating lawmen like Earp and Masterson and Hickok." And then, "But I'd look darn foolish wearing leather vests and tied-down .45's just to sit behind a desk."

Old Matt Turner, the retiring U. S. marshal, was in his office when Toggleson arrived.

"Sit down, Bill," Turner said. "Hell's broke loose again."

"What's that?"

"Kurt Ord broke out of the pen down in Huntsville. They say he's headed for the Territory, swearing to kill you."

Toggleson said nothing for a moment. He was more or less used to this sort of thing. Ord was a man he had arrested three years before for a killing in Texas.

Turner said, "Some farmers down on Broken Bow Creek said they saw a stranger they think may be him. I've already got deputies checking on it." He wiped his forehead nervously. The man had never been fitted for the responsibilities of the U. S. marshal's office, and nobody knew it better than Turner. "I'll be glad to get back to my ranch," he said. Then he blurted, "Bill, I'm not kidding myself, you're the one that's been running this office, while I just kind of blundered around and made speeches."

Toggleson always took compliments awkwardly. He couldn't think of anything to say.

"The job ought to be yours," Turner said soberly. "I told the committee, but—well, I might as well tell you now, they kind of favor Clay Barnett."

The news hurt, but it was no great surprise. They favored Barnett, Toggleson thought, because he wore a wide-brim hat

and high-heel boots and had two .45's tied down on his legs. And maybe because he had two notches in his guns, representing two outlaws he had killed.

"Well," Toggleson said, "if they've made up their minds . . ."

"They haven't yet. That's why I want you to talk to them."

They walked out of the office, across the dusty street and down to the Community House where the meeting was being held. Turner grinned as they walked, as if he remembered something that pleased him.

"Remember," he said, "when I offered this deputy's job to you? Lord, I had things in a mess!"

Toggleson smiled faintly. He had been marshal at Dodge City at the time and his wife had wanted to make the move to Oklahoma. They had practically promised him Turner's job, when the old man decided to retire.

The committee was waiting for them when they got to the Community House. The room was filled with bankers, prominent land owners, businessmen, the cream of the Territory's society. Turner and Toggleson sat at the end of a long table while the committee members fired questions at them.

"We've gone over your record, Mr. Toggleson," a rancher said at last, "and I'm happy to say that we've heard nothing but good about your work."

SOMETHING happened to Toggleson. He was suddenly tired of it. "But you don't believe I'm the man for the job," Toggleson added bluntly. "I'm not tough enough."

The rancher's face warmed. "You have to admit that this is a tough country. Outlaws from all the surrounding states have made the Territory their personal sanctuary. Of course, nothing has been definitely decided as yet . . ."

Toggleson stood up. "Thank you, gentlemen." He bowed slightly and left the room with the marshal following behind him.

"Maybe," Turner said dryly, "if you just had a few notches in your gun things would turn out fine. Don't worry about it, Bill. I'll talk to them again."

It wouldn't do any good, Toggleson knew. They had already forgotten what kind of marshal he had been in Dodge, what kind of job he had done in Ellsworth when it was the toughest trail town in Kansas. They saw him as an insignificant little man doing paper work behind a desk.

"There's Clay Barnett and the boys," Turner said as some horses rounded into the street. "Maybe they found Kurt Ord." They hurried their steps to meet the horsemen in front of the marshal's office.

"Hello, Bill," Clay Barnett said, grinning. "You been over to face the committee?"

"We had a little set-to. Did you find Ord?"

"What we found was an Indian strayed off the Sac-and-Fox reservation. I bet Ord ain't in a hundred miles of the Territory."

They went into the marshal's office. Barnett was in fine humor. He sat on the marshall's desk, as if he already owned it. "I hope there's not goin' to be any hard feelings about this committee business," he said. "After it's over and done, that is."

Toggleson smiled, for he could look through Barnett's swagger and see a good-natured, gutty kid. He said, "Don't worry about it, Clay."

They talked for a while. Then, since there were no special assignments for them, they walked together toward Elm Street where they both lived. They made a strange pair. Clay Barnett with his wide-brimmed hat set cockily on the back of his head, his high-heeled boots whacking the boardwalk, his bone-handled .45's strapped low on his thighs. And walking beside him, the quiet little man in the blue-serge suit.

They came to Elm Street, a wide, dusty thoroughfare bordered with small frame houses. All the houses looked alike and were

almost exactly the same age, all of them being built directly after the run of '89. "Ain't this a hell of a thing?" Barnett said. "*Elm* Street!"

Toggleson laughed, for there was not a tree of any kind within miles of the town. The citizens had named the street, and because they were willing to work and had faith in the future, there would be trees there some day.

Toggleson turned off at his place and Barnett went down to his house, two lots down. Toggleson didn't see his son—it was just as well, he thought. What would he tell him? "Well, son, your father's got a new boss. Clay Barnett, who is not much more than half your father's age and who has less than half your father's experience. But we don't care about that, do we?" And then he thought, "The hell we don't!" And that made him slightly uncomfortable, for he was not a swearing man.

"William?" his wife called.

"Yes," he said. He hung his hat and coat on the hall rack and went into the kitchen.

Mrs. Toggleson had the Sunday chicken out of the oven, basting it. "Did you talk to the committee?"

Toggleson sat at the cook table. He felt suddenly tired. "They favor Barnett," he said.

"Clay Barnett!" Mrs. Toggleson straightened abruptly. "Why, that ridiculous. What does Clay know about running a marshal's office?" She took her apron off and deliberately folded it and placed it on the table. "Why, I've got a good mind to go down to the Community House and . . .."

But instead she began fussing with the oven again, not letting the disappointment show in her eyes. "We'll eat in the kitchen," she said. "I packed a lunch for Robert. He and the Barnett boy went fishing down on Broken Bow."

TOGGLESON spent the afternoon going through the telegraphed reports on Kurt Ord. The prisoner had overpowered a guard and made his escape in a prison supply wagon. He was reported to have been seen near Red River Station, heading into the Territory. Reports of that sort, Toggleson knew, were seldom reliable. He tried to remember what kind of man Ord was. But there had been so many men like him that it was difficult to separate one from the other in his memory.

He forgot Ord. Then, in the midst of paper work, he began to think of his wife and son. "I should get into some other kind of business," he thought. But he knew he never would; law-enforcing was the only business he knew. It was like anything else, though. You had a few good years and then they began to pass you up for the younger men. He wished vaguely that he had married younger and that his son could remember back to the days at Ellsworth and Dodge. He had cut quite a figure in those days, though, of course, he had never had the flash and color of a man like Bill Hickok. He always took pride in the fact that he had never been forced to kill a man.

The sun was settling low on the prairie when Toggleson called it a day and started back toward Elm Street. His wife met him at the door, her eyes worried.

"William," she said, "Bobby hasn't come home yet. I'm worried something's happened."

"Probably he's over at Clay Barnett's house," Toggleson suggested, "cleaning his fish."

"No, he isn't. Emma Barnett came over a while ago, wanting to know if I'd seen her Tommy."

Toggleson paused in the act of hanging his hat on the hall rack. "Well," he said, "maybe the fish are biting good down at Broken Bow. But I'll get the buggy and fetch them home."

He walked back toward town, to the livery barn, and got the government-owned buggy hitched. Going past the Barnett house, Clay called to him.

"Going down toward the creek, Bill?"

"I thought I'd better fetch the boys home before the women start worrying. Want to come along?"

"Thanks," Clay Barnett said. He swung up to the spring seat. Toggleson clucked to the horse and they rolled south.

When they got to the creek they got out and walked north along the bank. "Robert!" Toggleson called.

"Tommy!" Clay Barnett bellowed. To Toggleson he said, "I'll blister the little whelp when I find him."

There was no sound except for their own thrashing about in the brush. They called several times, still there was no answer.

"What do you reckon?" Barnett said, his voice becoming touched with uneasiness.

"They headed across the fields, more than likely," Toggleson said, "and took the short way home."

"We'd have seen if they had done that."

Toggleson nodded. "It seems like we would." For no reason that he could think of a chill settled in his bones. "Maybe we'd better go a piece farther up the creek."

They tramped along the banks to all the known fishing holes. They called and got no answer. It was almost dark now and their casual air was vanishing rapidly.

"Tommy!" Barnett shouted.

They heard the sound. The reckless, unheedful noise of something crashing through the brush, like animals racing before a grassfire. Both men started running toward it. "Tommy!" Barnett called again.

But it wasn't his boy. It was Robert, and William Toggleson breathed a prayer of thanks. "Robert," he called, "over here!"

THE boy kept running, as if he hadn't heard. He stumbled in the twisted briars along the creekbank and fell. Immediately he was up again. They could hear him sobbing, gasping.

Toggleson called again, but the boy was running blindly, in stark fear. Toggleson and Barnett crashed through the undergrowth to head him off. The boy started to scream as his father took his arm.

"Here," Toggleson said sharply. "Stop that."

The wildness in the boy's eyes receded. For the first time, it seemed, he recognized Toggleson as his father. "All right," Toggleson said gently. "You're safe now, son. Everything's all right."

They got it out of the boy a little at a time, in incoherent bits and pieces. A man had followed them across the field, he said, all the way to the creek. He was a small, bearded man with stooped shoulders and an awful temper. He had asked if one of the boys was the U. S. marshal's son, and Tommy Barnett, boylike, had answered quickly that he was.

"He jabbed us with his rifle," the boy gasped. "We was scared. He made us go up in the hills, up to Smuggler's Peak. He said he would kill us if we didn't. He kept swearin' at Tommy, like he was 'specially mad at him."

"Take your time, son," Toggleson said quietly. "Tell us everything. Everything that happened."

The boy was recovering from his fright. He found himself the center of attention and excitement and he liked it. "We went all the way to Smuggler's Peak. The man made us stop there; he swore a lot and said maybe he would kill both of us. But he wrote a note and told me to take it home. He wouldn't let Tommy come."

"A note?" Toggleson said.

The boy produced it, a few words scrawled in pencil on the back of a wheat-straw cigarette paper. "Toggleson if you want your boy come and get him. The kid will tell you where." On the other side of the paper were the words, "Come alone if you want him alive."

Dumbly, Barnett took the paper from Toggleson's hand. In the fading light his eyes looked sick. He said one word.

"Ord."

Toggleson felt much older than his forty-six years. "He must have mistaken your boy for mine," he said heavily.

There was wildness in Barnett's eyes. "I'm going after Tommy!"

"Don't be a fool!" Toggleson said sharply. "The man's crazy for revenge. He thinks he's got my boy. If I don't go up there alone the boy is done for."

Clay Barnett was a beaten man. He kept rubbing his face, his eyes large with dread and bewilderment. "He wants to kill you," he murmured. "That's why he's holding the boy, to make you come to him."

It was almost as if Toggleson had not thought of it in that light. Now he did. Ord wanted to kill him. That was the way it was planned. He found himself thinking: I'd be a fool to go up there and let him kill me. It's not my son. Robert's safe. Immediately he felt ashamed of the thought.

"Give me one of your guns, Clay."

Without thinking, Barnett handed him a .45 and Toggleson dropped it into his coat pocket. "Now take Robert to his mother," he said, "and don't come near the peak, whatever you do. Get a posse together and cut off the escape routes, but don't come near that peak."

AN HOUR later Toggleson was groping in the darkness near the base of Smuggler's Peak. He didn't remember all he had said to Barnett, but somehow he had gotten the man to let him handle it in his own way. It was the only thing they could do. Even Barnett could see that. He had to trust him. Toggleson kicked a rock in his fumbling and it rolled down the side of the peak.

"Stay where you are!" Kurt Ord's voice called from above.

"It's me, Ord. Toggleson. I'm all alone."

Ord laughed. "Ain't that dandy. Just make yourself comfortable and we'll talk about it in the mornin' when there's some light."

Toggleson lay rigid on the rocky ground. He had hoped to make the darkness work on his side, but Ord was too sly for that. Nobody pulled tricks on Ord. He would stay right where he was until the sun came up. The Barnett boy yelled suddenly, as if he had been kicked.

"That's to remind you not to try anything funny," Ord called. "If I hear you move, your kid gets a bullet in his skull."

There was no use trying to convince Ord that Tommy wasn't his son. Ord would just laugh.

Toggleson bit his teeth until his jaws ached. The night seemed endless. He could neither advance nor retreat from his position on the slope. Whenever he tried, he heard the boy's cry of pain. He tried to think coolly about what he was going to do when morning came. Words were no good, he knew. You couldn't talk to a man like Ord. Would the killer let the boy go after . . .

After what? Toggleson wondered. After Ord had killed him? Even then he doubted if the boy would be safe, for the killer would certainly hold him as hostage while he tried to escape the posse.

"Enjoy yourself, Marshal," Ord called, laughing. "It won't be long now."

But it was. It was a long, long time, and there was nothing to do but wait. Vaguely, Toggleson could make out the blurred shape of a boulder up ahead. He started crawling toward it. He made it, but not without hearing the boy cry out.

"The next time he gets a bullet, Marshal. Think about that before you start crawlin' around."

He stayed still after that. His legs were cramped and his insides ached. Before long the night and the waiting seemed to lose all meaning. "What am I doing here?" he thought. "I must be crazy. Ord's going to kill me. He planned it this way just so he could kill me." He found himself thinking, "It's Barnett's boy, not mine, who's in danger. Why isn't Clay here?" He realized at last that he was scared.

That unnerved him. It had been so long since he had been scared that he had forgotten what it was like. Maybe the committee was right; maybe they needed a younger man for the marshal's job. "Too much sitting behind a desk," he thought. "Maybe I lost my nerve."

But he didn't move. He could hear the boy sob once in a while, but that was all. It was his job, so he stayed and waited for the dawn. What he was going to do then he didn't know.

At last the sky began to pale. Toggleson imagined that he could hear the sound of horses in the distance—Clay Barnett and the posse. But a posse couldn't help him or the boy.

When it got lighter he could see the top of the slope known as Smuggler's Peak. There were a lot of large rocks up there and that was probably where Ord and the boy were, behind the rocks. Every second he expected something to happen. A rifle to explode. A bullet to whine. Nothing happened. Ord knew that the half light of very early dawn could not be depended on when it came to aiming a rifle. But finally the time did come. Toggleson could hear the note of anticipation and bitterness in Ord's voice as he called: "Throw your pistol away, Marshal. I want to see it when it hits."

"Turn the boy loose first."

Ord grunted and the boy cried out in pain. Toggleson took Barnett's heavy .45 from his coat pocket and threw it toward the bottom of the slope. There was nothing else to do.

"That's more like it," Ord called with satisfaction. "Now come right up the slope, Marshal. I want to look at you. I want to look at you good before I blow you to Kingdom Come!" He laughed.

Toggleson couldn't move. "Now," he told himself. "Rush him with the .38. Maybe you'll be lucky." He couldn't do it. It was a senseless way to get killed.

"It's you or the boy, Toggleson," Ord called down confidently. "Which is it goin' to be?"

SURPRISED, Toggleson found himself coming to his knees. He slipped the small .38 into the sleeve of his coat and stood up. No bullet ripped into him. Ord wasn't ready yet. He wanted to enjoy it.

"That's right, Marshal. Come right on up where I can see you."

Toggleson felt that all reason had left him. He began to climb into the muzzle of the killer's rifle, it seemed. He could see Ord, a twisted little man with a dirty black beard and burning eyes. He could see the boy, huddled against a rock, sobbing. Toggleson kept his hands raised, partly because Ord expected it of him, partly to keep the .38 from falling from his sleeve. He heard himself saying, "Let the boy go, Ord. You've got me."

Ord laughed. "The boy's good for me. I don't reckon there's goin' to be much shootin' as long as I've got him with me."

The boy stopped sobbing. He said, "You better let me go! My father's a U. S. marshal!"

Toggleson almost smiled, a bit wistfully. Then he did a crazy thing. He flung himself to the ground only a few feet from the muzzle of Ord's rifle. He hit, rolled, tried to brace himself for the shock of a bullet tearing into him.

He startled Ord for a moment. But only for a moment. Then the killer grinned and calmly pulled the trigger.

Toggleson heard his breath whistle between his teeth. He felt as if he had been kicked in the stomach by a mule. He was faintly surprised when the .38 slid out of his sleeve and into his hand. He pulled the trigger once, twice, three times.

That was the last he remembered until he opened his eyes and saw Clay Barnett and the posse members standing around solemnly.

"Is the boy all right?" Toggleson asked.

(Continued on page 110)

The Man From Hell

The big man whirled, his hand moving toward his gun. . . .

By KENNETH FOWLER

He had a message from Hell for the kid. It was the kind of message only a man who'd come back from there could give.

THE cabin was small. It stood in a motte of cottonwoods, on a low ridge. The ridge looked out over a creek-watered valley lush with grama grass. Far behind it the Datils stood in gray rank, hoisting their granite bluffs into sheer blue sky.

From the saddle of his bushed-out sabino, Joe Mitchener stared down at the cabin's sun-fired windows with a frowning intensity. He was tolerably certain this was the place. Rick had described it to him often enough. Judas, he thought, this had to be it.

A somber look filled his haze-gray eyes. Under the brim of his tipped-down Stetson the sun still slashed at them, making him squint. Rick. He spoke the name

aloud. It came hard. Just thinking about it put a knot in his throat. Rick Slater, dead. And at an age when you could hardly call him more than a kid. Nineteen—going on twenty, maybe. Wasn't right for anybody to have to push in his chips at that age. But when your number's on a posse bullet, you get it. Like two and two adding to four. You can't make it come any other way.

For a long moment horse and rider were rigid in the brassy sunlight burning down on them. The sabino's tail flicked out in sudden irritation at the heel flies buzzing around it. The man ignored them. His narrow high-boned face looked like weather-scoured granite; in it, only the eyes seemed to flicker now and then into life.

He was barely twenty-one, but his mind held no consciousness of irony in his thinking of Rick Slater as a kid. As a kid himself, he had been a fiddlefoot; he had never hung up his saddle very long in one place. And for the last five years he had frankly been a highline rider, and when his backtrail got too hot, he drifted. He was hard and old and bitter, old with the experience that fed his bitterness, and hard from the need of hardness in the way fate had cast his life.

His mouth had the look of a raw cut, pinched under the three-day sprout of whiskers bristling his jaw line. The wound in his shoulder had begun to fester. His cotton shirt covered it, but the bandage under it had started to leak and there was a rust-colored crust on the shoulder of his sleeve where blood had soaked through the cloth.

Why can't somebody else tell the girl? Why do I have to get all the dirty jobs?

He knew why. He'd asked himself the question a dozen or more times, and each time he'd gotten the same simple answer. Because there was nobody else.

HIS glance reconnoitered the cabin again. Sure looked cool down there, under the shade of those cottons. Like an oasis. And he could see a cistern in back of the cabin. Bet that water would taste sweeter than cold beer. His mind built the dream of tasting it. Of running it down his gullet in a long luxuriating draught.

The sun suddenly seemed more dazzling. There was a peculiar swirl of light in front of his eyes and for a moment he couldn't see. He rubbed a hand across his forehead. His head felt hot. He could see the cabin again now, dimly. It seemed to be rocking gently. Rocking on a sea of heat waves shimmering up from the cracked, baked earth.

He didn't have to be the one to tell her. Let her find out some other way.

But he'd promised Rick. Rick's sister. One of those things. He had these few trinkets Rick had asked him to give her, but what did they amount to? A faded tintype, showing Rick and Polly Slater as kids. Another picture, glued inside the case of Rick's silver stem-winder, of a gaunt, tired-faced woman with sunken eyes. Their mother, probably. A few other odds and ends. Junk nobody'd ever want.

He had enough troubles. He'd been almost a week shaking that posse off his backtrail. Now he couldn't be too far from Siringo. He'd just stop at the cabin long enough to bum some grub and water and then slope on to Siringo and hole up for a spell. The main thing was to find Dutch Lindermann, and Dutch was a sucker for the bright lights. Dutch might hide out for a time, but with all that money in his poke, sooner or later he'd wind up in some deadfall. And Siringo was the only town of any size hereabouts. Might be he'd cut Dutch's sign there. And when he did . . .

Joe Mitchener's mouth ironed into a flat line as he took makings from his pocket and gently pecked his finger at the sack of Bull, sifting tobacco evenly into the rice paper. His thought ran back, somber with remembrance. Damn that Dutchman! They'd made a fireless camp in the canyon, not sure whether they'd slipped the posse that had

been dogging their heels, and Dutch had volunteered for the early night watch. And while he and Rick had been asleep, Dutch had fogged it. Fogged it with the thousand dollars that was to have been split three ways between them—their stake from herding a bunch of wet stuff across the Rio, two weeks earlier. And that same night a couple riders scouting ahead of the posse had come up and surprised him and Rick. He'd taken a slug in his shoulder, fighting them off. But the kid had gotten it for keeps. . .

A kid. That was all Rick Slater had been. A kid with an itch in his heels and a hankering for excitement. You knew, in this business, the chances you were taking. But you never though about it much. Not until something like that happened to you.

Joe Mitchener made a long study of the match in his hand, then suddenly whipped it across his blue denim pants and laid the flame to his cigarette. He took a deep drag on it and let the smoke coil in his throat before slowly exhaling it. Then he gigged the sabino, heading it down the rutted trail towards the cabin.

His shoulder began to pound with a steady rhythm. He could feel the concussion clear down in his belly and fought down a sudden feeling of faintness. To hell with it. He'd stop at the cabin just long enough to get a bait of grub. There was enough in his poke to pay for that. He'd cool his saddle a bit, then head out for Siringo.

When he reined up in front of the cabin he could hear someone moving around inside. A drawn shade twitched, became motionless again. A wave of dizziness washed through him as he slid down from the saddle. Hell, anybody'd think he was roostered. He leaned against the sabino to steady himself. Then the door was coming slowly open. The stock of a rifle thudded back against it, butting it open fully.

She was something to look at. Even in Levis and that wash-faded blue shirt, frankly out at the elbows. Pan size, but curvy. And hair red as Alabama swamp clay. Joe Mitchener stared as it caught fire in the sun. The braids reached back from her forehead in gleaming coils. Same color as Rick's. Same color, but . . .

"Something you wanted, mister?"

Even the voice. And the cool blue eyes. Joe Mitchener's glance dropped to the rifle. You could tell, sometimes. Whether to move or not to move. This was a time not to.

"Just—just a dipper of water, ma'am." He was conscious of trouble with his voice. His chest felt like a tight-laced drum. Pain from the tightness was making long shooting stabs at his belly. "And maybe a bait of grub. I—" The words stopped. That strange, faraway sound his voice made.

"You ridin' the grub-line, mister?"

It was getting crazy. Her face was going away from him. It was under water. It was a reflection in a cracked mirror.

Mustn't laugh, though. Crack those sun blisters on his mouth.

"I—I can pay, ma'am. I—"

She looked startled suddenly. He heard her cry, "Johnny!" and was conscious of a strange detachment, thinking: "No ma'am. Name of Joe Mitchener," and then there was a sensation of falling off into space. No, water. He was plunged down into cool dark water, where she was hiding from him. He couldn't find her. Everything, everything went black.

IT WAS the morning of his fourth day at the Slater place before Joe Mitchener felt up to trying his saddle. He still felt light-headed after exertion, he discovered. And Siringo was a good twenty-mile piece from the cabin. He'd ridden just two-three miles and was pooped already. Plumb bushed. He'd have to go back. Didn't cotton much to the idea, though, after what had happened at the cabin this morning. Fat was in the fire for sure now. But he couldn't ride any farther today. He'd need another day, to rest up.

The sabino stood halted on a low ridge that looked down on a bowl-like clearing cleft out of the hills. A creek cut through the clearing, its course mapped by the thick clumps of alder bordering it. Fifty yards to the left of the creek was a ramshackle cabin that looked like an abandoned line camp. Joe Mitchener stared down at it absently, trying to swing his thoughts from Polly Slater. Somebody had a horse staked out in back of the shack. Squatter, likely.

Quit thinking about her, you damned fool, he told himself. But he couldn't. Nor about the kid, Johnny. He'd been out of his head for a couple days, and in his hallucinations the kid walking in and out of his room had been Rick. Rick had never mentioned having a younger brother. It was Polly Rick had always talked about. Had her on his conscience, likely. But this kid. Fifteen, sixteen maybe. Put a little lard on his brisket and give him a year to grow on and there'd be Rick. You could see Rick in his eyes. Same faraway look. Never with you completely. Always away, away. Impatient with time. Wanting to burn up time.

The girl, Polly. She was the steady one, the rudder. Done a mighty fine job on his shoulder, too. It had stopped draining now, and had begun to heal. A sawbones couldn't have done any better by him.

But she was worried about the kid. Until a couple weeks ago Johnny'd had a job with the Box G, a big syndicate outfit in the neighborhood, run by a man named Wilson Grube. He'd quit. Told his sister he'd never get any place working as top hand to a dough-wrangler. Wanted to ride and be a big auger. Too much spread, for a youngster. Needed somebody to dust his pants for him.

Frowning, Joe Mitchener finished the cigarette he was building and tucked it into a corner of his mouth, A feeling of guilty shame burned in him as he remembered the scene in the cabin that morning. He'd about made up his mind to get it off his chest and tell Polly about Rick. And she had beaten him to the punch. Plumb knocked the wind out of him.

When he let his mind back-track on it, he felt himself getting as confused and tightened up as he had been this forenoon, when it had actually happened.

"There's some wood for your stove." He'd come into the kitchen by the back door and dropped the sticks in her woodbox. She had been bent over the oven of her stove and there had been the warm clean scent of baking in the room. She didn't look up immediately, and he added, "I'll probably be ridin' out of here, tomorrow."

Deliberately, she straightened up and faced him. "I hope nothing will delay you," she said.

"You don't like me much, do you?" he said.

"I hate you and all your kind!"

The suddenness of it was like a flash of lightning out of a clear sky. He stood frozen with shock, staring at her.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know what I mean! You were with Rick!"

"All right," he said. He braced himself. "Rick—"

"I know! I don't need you to tell me!" she cut him off fiercely. "Rick—Rick's dead!"

Her voice caught on a sob and he felt his vocal chords numbing. "I—I'm sorry!" he muttered.

"*You're* sorry!" she flared. "Do you think I want your cheap sympathy? All I wanted was to be told. But you weren't big enough to do that! It made no difference to you how much I might have wanted those things of Rick's!"

He had a vague awareness of his hand going down to the pocket of his pants, touching emptiness. So that was it. A sick drained feeling ran through him as he looked back at her.

"Look . . . he said.

Her shoulders drooped suddenly as she sank into a chair, hands pressed to her face. "Leave me alone," she moaned. "Oh, go away and leave me alone!"

The tension broke. He stood tensed, watching her shoulders crumple under violent bursting sobs.

"Look . . ." he began again. But it wasn't there. Nothing was there. He wanted to say: Look. Rick took a chance. It's what you do when you're foot-loose, when you've got that fire in your heels. But Rick had more than I ever had. Rick was lucky. He was lucky and he didn't know it.

He wanted to say that, and more. His need to help her was a fierce torturing pressure inside him. But she wasn't there. Not for him. Some were lucky and didn't have savvy enough to know it. They had somebody to give a damn. He had a horse and a saddle. And a damned emptiness in the gut, knowing it wasn't enough.

He had left her there. Grief wanted no pardner. Grief had to be carried alone, until time healed it over and there was just the scar left. He had gone out back and ducked his head into the spring-fed cistern tank there. The icy shock of the water had helped a little, and after a while he had walked up to the corral, saddled his sabino and ridden up here. Far as he could make it. Today, leastways.

His thoughts roiled darkly, running back to the girl. Unless he was barking up the wrong tree, she had another misery on her mind. Johnny. Fifteen, sixteen, and no sign of being halter-broke yet. Not the kind to stand hitched any more than Rick was, unless somebody took a hand there pretty quick. But who? Not Polly Slater. Take more than petticoat law to hold him.

Abruptly, Joe Mitchener flipped away his burnt-out cigarette. Then he swung the sabino, heading it back towards the cabin.

POLLY SLATER was making supper when he walked into the kitchen. She seemed better. Her eyes wer still puffed and red-rimmed, and though her manner was listless, she was going about her chores, which was a good sign. Outside, in the shed, he had picked up another armload of wood. He let it slide out of his arms into the woodbox.

She began dipping beans out of an earthenware pot Her voice was flat, edged with hostility.

"When I need wood, I can get it."

"No need to be stubborn about it," he said. "Maybe I feel I ought to earn my keep."

"You don't owe us anything. Johnny brings my wood."

He said, "Johnny didn't bring any today," and saw the imprint of his words in the sudden contraction of her eyes.

She ignored that. "You can wash up, if you like," she said. "Food's about ready."

"Where is Johnny?" he said. "I haven't seen him since mornin'."

She threw down the bean ladle with sudden exasperation. "How do I know where he is? I can't keep track of him every single minute!"

"But you try."

"That's my business!"

"Might be I could give you a hand there, you'd let me try."

"Like you did with Rick, I suppose?" she said sarcastically.

"I never knew Rick till I met him on the trail. He was in the same business I was."

She bit her lip. He stared at the tiny bead of blood on it. "You'll never find Johnny in that business! Not if I can help it!"

"Not if I can, either," he said softly. He pressed it home. "I quit it," he said, "the day Rick died."

He searched her eyes, but could detect no clue of interest in them. They remained aloof, inscrutable.

"Sit down if you want to eat," she said. "I've had mine." She laid a plate of smoking beans before him and a platter of bis-

cuits. "Coffee's on the stove," she said, and went out.

The beans had a crisp juicy crust of blackstrap. Suddenly he felt hungry. He felt an actual sensuous pleasure from his first taste of them. A man could really have it good, he thought, on a place like this. All it needed was building up. The grass and water were here. The grass and water and . . .

His thought of Polly Slater was cut into by sweeping sounds in the main front room. A broom was being whisked briskly over the puncheon floor out there. An unfamiliar sound to Joe Mitchener's ears. But nice. Nice like a pleasant dream. Only you always woke up from a dream. Then you were alone again. You had the memory of the dream, but never the fulfillment.

POLLY SLATER was in the kitchen, cleaning up, and Joe Mitchener was out back of the woodshed, smoking an after-supper cigarette, when Johnny Slater rode in, dusty and tired looking, and headed his little coon-footed sorrel for the corral. Thoughtfully, Joe Mitchener studied him for a long moment through the smoke ribbon curving up from his cigarette. Finally, taking a last long drag on it, he snapped it away and started walking towards the corral.

Johnny had the saddle off the sorrel and was rubbing it down. He went right on working, as Joe Mitchener stood watching him.

"Looks kind of hard rid," Joe Mitchener remarked presently. "You must have gone quite a piece with him."

The kid's eyes showed a sullen cast, glancing up at him. "Fair piece."

"Made a little pasear myself, this mornin'. Anybody livin' in that shack along the crick, two-three mile above here?"

The kid seemed a little wary suddenly. "Squatter. Name of Bill Helck. He ain't nobody."

"Been there long?"

"Four-five days, I guess. How'd I know?"

"Cal'lated you might know him."

"Nah."

Joe Mitchener planted a boot on the gate post rail. "You and your sister got a middlin' good spot here, Johnny. Could be worked into something."

"Oh, yeah, this is some place!" Johnny turned and spat deliberately across his shoulder. "We got all of six yearlin's, and when they're fat enough Wilson Grube'll buy 'em off us for his Box G." The bitterness in his voice sharpened. "For half what they're worth."

"How come you quit Grube, Johnny?"

"Ah. Where'd anybody get on thirty a month and beans?"

"Far enough. If he stuck at it."

"Playin' hop-scotch with horse chips ain't my idea of it."

"You'd rather play it smart, eh, Johnny? Like Rick, maybe."

Johnny's eyes pinched thin. "What're you drivin' at?"

"Rick's dead."

"You ain't."

"Maybe you'd like to ride out of here with me when I leave tomorrow, Johnny."

Something like a gleam of light moved in Johnny Slater's eyes. He swung around fully, facing Joe Mitchener. "You mean that," he said, glancing furtively up towards the cabin and lowering his voice, "we could start in business right here. Will Grube's got plenty of cows. He wouldn't miss a few head."

"Blotted brands can be read pretty easy, Johnny."

"Dropped calves don't tell no story. It'd be easy to sneak 'em off Grube's range and haze 'em over here. Bill Helck counted a couple new ones, just yest'dy."

"Ha! So you do know Helck."

"Well—yeah. But I'd rather be with Rick's old pardner."

"Thanks," said Joe Mitchener dryly. A

feeling of irritability threaded him. "Don't guess I'd be interested, Johnny. Rather build up an honest herd. Pay better, in the long run."

"You and Rick done all right, I reckon."

A sudden cold anger welled in Joe Mitchener. "Sure," he said flatly. "Rick and me were doin' fine. We rustled a big herd down outa the Panhandle and got a stinkin' thousand dollars for it. Then a sheriff's posse cut our sign. There was three of us. This other hombre, Dutch Lindermann, lit out with the money one night when he was supposed to be on night guard. Then the posse caught up with us. That's when Rick got it." He paused, leveling his eyes on Johnny Slater. "That how you want to get rich the quick and easy way, Johnny?"

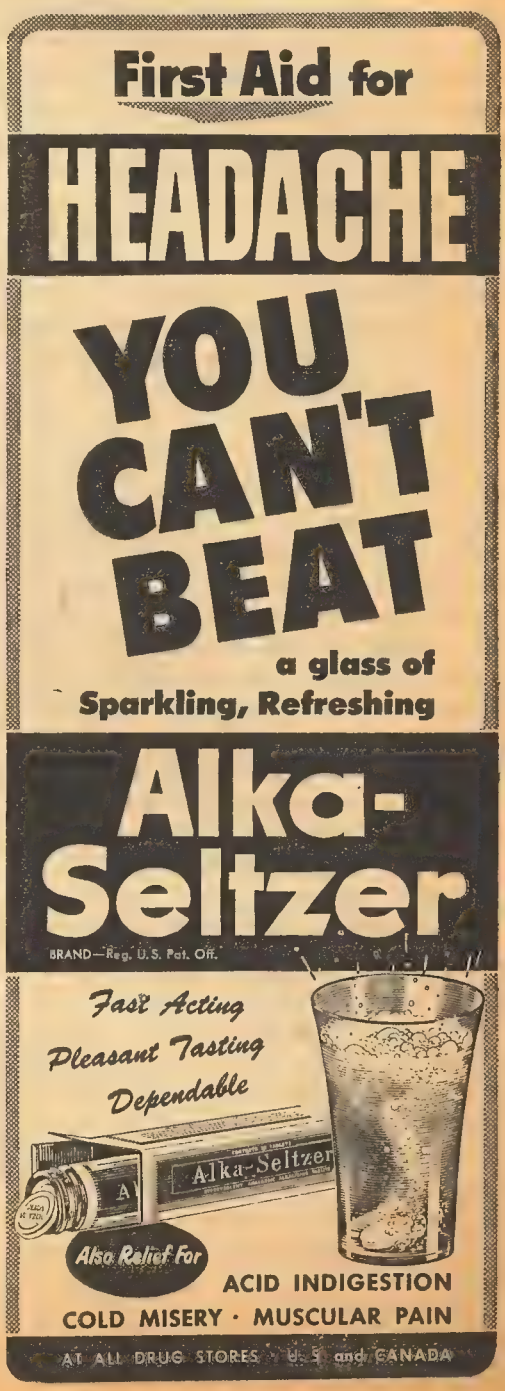
Johnny scuffed dirt with the toe of his boot. He looked up at Joe Mitchener, his smooth kid's face etched with sullen resentment. Then he spoke the challenging obscenity that sent Joe Mitchener vaulting over the corral's gate bar.

Johnny saw it coming too late. His hands flew up, but Joe Mitchener easily reached him with a cuffing clout against the temple that sent him reeling back against the sorrel, his eyes stretched wide with panic. Rebounding from the flank of the horse, he hurled himself at his tormenter with a reckless fury.

He had a lean, loose-coupled frame that some day would be as tough and saddle-hammered as Rick's, but he was no match now for Joe Mitchener. His fists scythed wildly as Joe Mitchener bunched a fistful of his shirt, and holding him disdainfully away, stroke his face with hard, deliberate slaps. When he let go, Johnny was sagging in his arms, his breath heaving in great muffled sobs.

"I—I'll get you for this!" he gasped. "I'll—I'll—" He staggered back and supported himself against the sorrel, his welted face working convulsively. "I'll kill you!" he screamed.

"Wait till you grow up, Johnny," Joe Mitchener said. He climbed back over the corral gate, and without looking around, started at his long, loose-gaited



horseman's stride back towards the cabin.

AT BREAKFAST, the next morning, no one talked much. Tension at the table was divided three ways. Polly Slater looked worried and preoccupied, Johnny was tight-lipped and sullen. Joe Mitchener had heard them talking in low angry voices, in the kitchen, before he'd gotten up. Now they were both stiff and silent in an atmosphere thick with distrust and animosity. The shadow of Rick cast its pall on the room. *If Rick could see this,* Joe Mitchener thought somberly.

He stared down at his coffee cup. He swirled up the dregs in it and gulped it down. Polly Slater was watching him.

"You can have another cup," she said.

"No, thanks," he said. "Got to be moseyin' along." He stood up from the table and looked down at her slim, pointed face. It had a dull ivory pallor. Made him think of a cameo. He didn't feel as if he'd just eaten. He was conscious of a peculiar drained feeling at the pit of his stomach. "I want to thank you," he said. The braids made him think of a bright red scarf around the top of her head. "Maybe I can pay you back some time."

"You don't owe anything," she told him.

He fished awkwardly in his pocket and laid two ten-dollar bills on the table. It was all he had left.

Swiftly, Polly Slater reached out and clutched at them. She pushed them fiercely back into his hand.

"We don't want your money!"

"All right." He sighed it out, pushing the money back in his pocket. "I wouldn't have taken it either. It's got blood on it."

He took a long steady look at her. He thought of a fence. You could ride on either side of a fence. Right side or wrong side. But cross over to the wrong side and it was tough to get back. The hole you'd thought you left maybe wasn't there any more. And now Johnny was hunting a hole. A hole he might never get back through. He looked at Johnny. *"Adios,* Johnny," he said.

The kid gave him a stiff surly look. He didn't answer.

"You take care of your sister," he said, and walked to the door.

It was only a stone's throw up to the corral. It seemed farther to Joe Mitchener. His fingers fumbled as he cinched his saddle onto the sabino. When he was up, his shoulder felt pretty good. He patted the gun slung at his hip. He'd make it today. After one little stop. . . .

He gigged the sabino, starting it out of the corral. He swung it west, towards the ridge. From there you got a good view of that old line shack down by the creek.

JOE MITCHENER picked a spot some two hundred yards from the shack—a high rimrock, well screened by a ledge of buck brush, which looked down upon the back of the ramshackle structure and its skimpily built corral. A horse stood hipshot within the enclosure, idly cropping bunch grass. There was no other visible sign of life about the place. A section of stove pipe protruding crookedly through a side window was devoid of smoke.

Joe Mitchener swung down from the saddle and led the sabino into a motte of hackberry, where he ground-hitched it. Then he took a pair of worn field glasses from the saddle pouch and walked back to the rimrock, bellying down behind the buck brush. He removed the glasses from their scuffed leather case and adjusted them into focus, studying the cabin and its adjacent terrain. He could see nothing through a smudged rear window. He swung the glasses towards the corral. He stiffened suddenly.

The horse lazily cropping at the bunch grass was a zebra dun, with a Texas skirt saddle. Joe Mitchener swore softly. Zebra duns weren't too common. And you didn't often see a Texas skirt saddle this far north of the Panhandle. Still, it might

mean nothing. Might not. Then again . . .

His attention was diverted suddenly. A rider was cruising down from the ridge above the cabin. He swung the glasses, and without surprise recognized Johnny Slater. Breathing softly, he returned the glasses to their case and watched. Halfway down the slope Johnny had paused and looked back across his shoulder. Now he was apparently satisfied that his backtrail was clear. He headed the sorrel openly in the direction of the shack, and reaching level ground gigged it up to a fast trot.

The dumb kid! Joe Mitchener scowled down at the cigarette he was building. Roughing him up the night before had been a waste of effort.

Abruptly he flung away the freshly made cigarette and made his way to the lee side of the rimrock. From here the slope graduated downward by a series of rocky shelves towards a swalelike flat in back of the shack. He began a cautious descent, zigzagging when it was necessary, to utilize whatever sparse cover was available.

Reaching the edge of the swale, he went down on his belly again and began wriggling through the hip-high grass. The grass whispered. The grass said: Rick, Rick, Rick.

He came to a point a few yards from the back of the shack and halted, breathing hard. Here the grass ended. In the tiny corral, the zebra dun arched its head and stared at him with big dumb eyes. A zebra dun with a Texas-skirt saddle. Joe Mitchener felt his nerves pull taut. That bronc sure had a familiar look. Okay. He'd be ready.

A low woodpile stood a few feet from the shack's rear window. Crawling on his hands and knees, he reached it and hunkered down. The voices from inside the shack were muffled, too low for him to distinguish one from the other. But he knew how the talk would trend. Free calves. Free cows. Pronto! A free herd. You know anything easier, kid? Name it?

Sure, Johnny, free, Joe Mitchener thought darkly. With a big hole in your conscience, and maybe one in your gut. Or maybe it'll be the big hole in the walls at Yuma, where they march you in. And then the hole closes behind you. Ever seen men marched into a place like that, Johnny? It's the end of the world. You're just a number. You'd be dead in there, Johnny. You'd be better off with that hole in your gut.

The voices inside the cabin grew fainter suddenly. Joe Mitchener stood. Crouched, he paced swiftly to the back of the shack. Pressed against the rough board siding, he edged his way to the opened rear window. Now he could hear clearly.

"Okay, Bill," Johnny was saying, "I'll meet you here tonight then. I know where they's a couple been dropped, over on Grube's east forty."

The voice answering had a thick gutteral accent. *"Ja.* I meet you here den. You vill be prombt—*nein?"*

Shock crashed on Joe Mitchener. The zebra dun. Now that voice. You could be mistaken about a horse. But not a voice. Not a voice like that.

Joe Mitchener moved with a deliberate stalking gait to the front of the shack. Johnny Slater's sorrel stood hip-shot down by the creek bank, its tail swishing lazily. The backs of the two figures walking towards the horse offered a startling contrast. Beside Johnny's spindly frame, the man in the red-checkered shirt looked immense.

Joe Mitchener said, *"Ja,* Dutch. I meet you here den," and the man in the red shirt seemed to jerk taut. Then, like a life-sized puppet actuated by a released spring, he whirled with a clumsy violence.

A trigger-set tension held Joe Mitchener rigid. Dutch Lindermann's lower jaw hung slack, like a shutter dangling from a single hinge. For a split second, it had the stark, stiff quality of a tableau. Then it

disintegrated. Dutch Lindermann's hand moved.

The movement of Joe Mitchener's was quicker. A blur of arcing blue. Flame spouted from the arc, rosily nippling a wreath of smoke.

Dutch Lindermann's gun cleared leather, and that was all. His hand dropped limply. He stood until the gun slid from his relaxing fingers, as if patiently waiting for it. His knees bent slowly, and even in falling his heavy frame seemed to sway leisurely. His head slammed against Johnny Slater's legs and caromed away with a grotesque bounce.

Johnny Slater jumped as if it were a coiled rattler. It was a dead rattler. The kid's face was like a piece of bleached muslin stretched over a frame.

Slowly Joe Mitchener slid his gun back in its holster.

"All right, Johnny," he said. "Let's go home."

HE HAD gone back later, alone, and found the money buried under the floor of the shack—the thousand dollars he and Rick and Dutch Lindermann were to have divided three ways. Now, piled in a neat stack on the table in the Slater cabin, it seemed personally valueless to him and he had told Polly Slater and Johnny what he had intended doing with it.

Johnny seemed unable to take his eyes from it. There it was. The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. But rainbows didn't last long. Maybe money didn't either, when you got it this way. Johnny was remembering the look on Dutch Lindermann's face when Joe Mitchener's bullet had hit him.

Joe Mitchener looked at him. "I know where there's another pile, Johnny," he said. "Just like this."

"Ah," Johnny said. "Where?"

"Right here. Right here on this place," Joe Mitchener said.

Johnny said, "You're loco!"

"Right here," Joe Mitchener repeated. "Look at the grass you got here. Look at the water. How much farther you got to look?"

His glance swung to Polly Slater. He sure had it bad. Petticoat fever. For a second he thought he'd seen a secret, intimate look of understanding in her eyes.

"Johnny could get back his job with Wilson Grube," she said. She seemed to be talking to herself. Talking sleepily to herself, in a dream. "We could run a few more cows, later. But we'd need another hand. I don't know where—"

"I do," said Joe Mitchener. But first he'd have to go to Siringo. Mail that money to the sheriff, with a little note. Unsigned. Then . . .

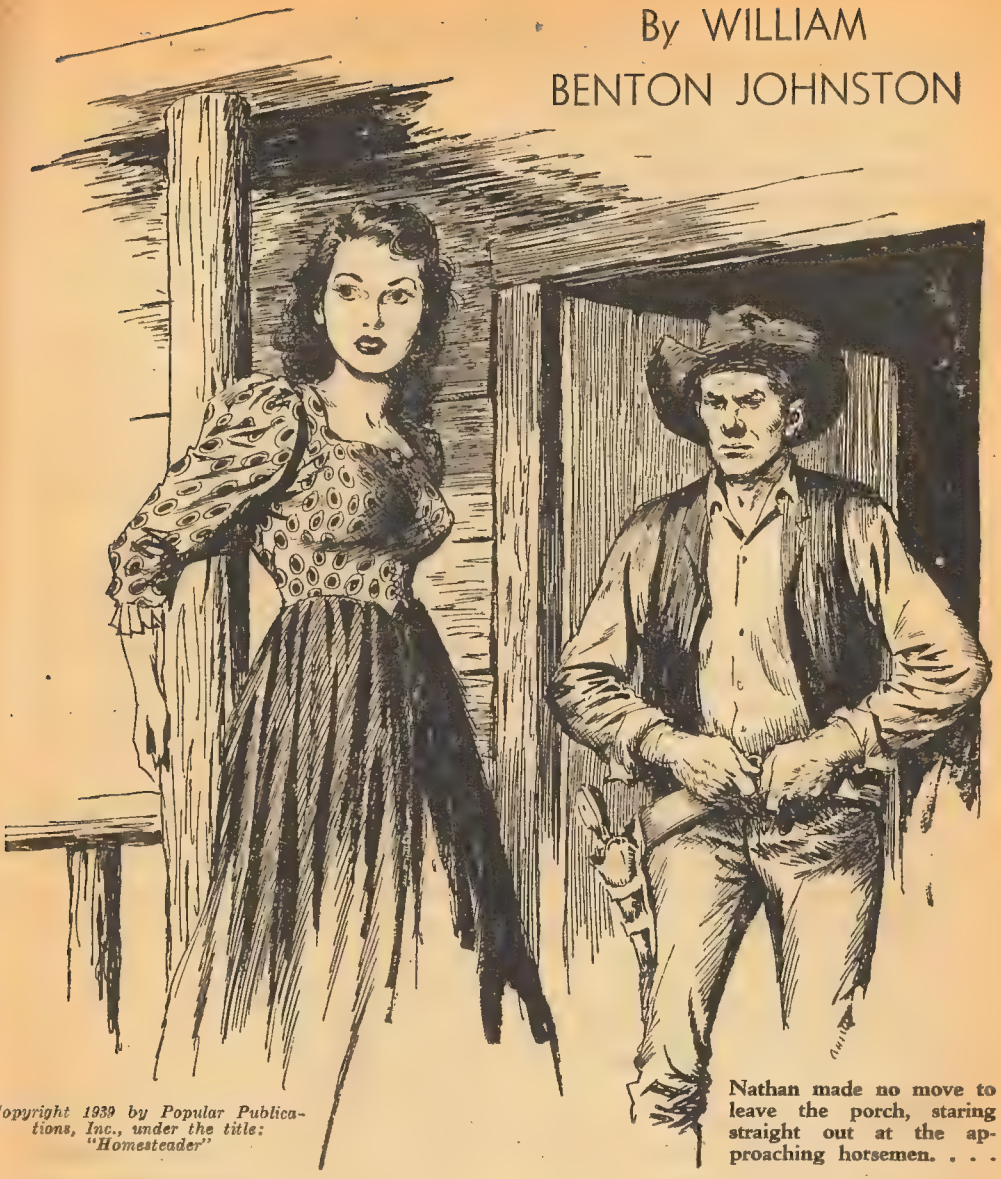
"You could use Rick's old room," Polly Slater said. There was something about a redhead. Something could hit a man quicker than a shot of corn. Joe Mitchener let his eyes stay on her this time. He picked up the stack of bills from the table.

"Have you got a box and a piece of string?" he asked. ● ● ●

After-Dinner Walk

THE sheriff of Juddville, Wyoming, regarded Tupper Clark, chuck wagon chef, as his prize prisoner. Since Tup had been in jail, everyone had gained weight. His flannel cakes were famous, and one night the prairie cook put into them all he had, including tobasco, laundry starch, mustard and gaseous yeast. The sheriff and his deputies smothered the hot delicacies in syrup and gulped them down. While the lawmen were howling for water and clutching their bellies where the leaden pancakes foamed, Tupper relieved the sheriff of his keys and walked calmly out the front door into the night.

By WILLIAM BENTON JOHNSTON



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Nathan made no move to leave the porch, staring straight out at the approaching horsemen. . . .

TWO TRAILS OUT

In that black moment that called for a fighting man, Riley discovered that he'd sold himself out for a woman—and a kid's bag of peppermints!

THE house was new and unmellowed, and the clear ground around it made a brown scar on the green, far-reaching length of the valley. Yet there was already a homelike atmosphere here, manifest in bright curtains and planted flowers and consideration of small details which showed

unmistakably a woman's care and pride.

It was a pretty place, too, with the upsweep of the hills back of it and, beyond these, the stony summits making their high, irregular pattern against the sky. Before it, the mesa ran into the far distance, smooth and flat and unbroken.

And on this morning, before the sun reached its full brilliance, Nathan and Linda Riley stood close together on their ranch house porch and watched riders come across the mesa. Before them, Betty, their daughter, played in the scraped yard with a four-year-old enthusiasm and a fine disregard for earth stains upon her face and pink gingham dress.

Nathan and Linda looked at the approaching riders and shared an instinctive uneasiness that turned them still and silent. They watched as diminishing distance sorted the riders from one dark mass into individuals.

"Twin-T," Nathan said, and with that he turned into the house. He came back with a gunbelt buckled about his waist.

At sight of this, Linda went out to the yard and picked up the little girl.

"I'm building a mountain," Betty objected, pointing to a tiny pile of dirt. "Look, I'm putting rocks on top of it, just like—"

Linda said patiently, "Never mind, dear. You can finish it later." She took the child, still protesting, into the house.

Presently, Linda returned to her husband's side. One brief glance they exchanged and then stood there and waited, saying nothing.

There were four of these horsemen who drew rein at the corral. Seeing that Nathan made no move to leave the porch, they stepped down from their saddles and walked to the house.

THE leader was a big man, tall and broad and with the flat muscles of a rider, walking with a self-assured swagger and arrogance. He stopped in the middle of the yard, smiling and lifting his hat to Linda, while his men stood grouped behind him.

"Howdy, folks," the big man said. "You've got things fixed up right pretty around here."

Nathan looked at him silently, at once appraising the insincerity of his smile and seeing how boldly his glance ran out to Linda.

"I'm Tom Trevor," the big man said, "owner of the Twin-T, up at the valley head. That makes me sort of a neighbor."

Nathan said, "My name is Riley." He hesitated a moment, stretching that interval out to light his cigarette. "This is my wife," he added reluctantly.

Trevor's gaze was sharp and greedy upon Linda's body, with open appreciation of her lithe good looks. His glance shifted to her face, but she was on guard against that and did not meet his eyes.

Trevor took off his hat again. "Howdy, ma'am As I said before, you've got a pretty place here."

Linda said, without smiling, "Thank you. Won't you gentlemen come up and sit on the porch?"

Trevor said, "Not this morning, ma'am. We've come for a little talk with your husband."

"You'll excuse me then," Linda said and turned back into the house, quietly and without haste.

Trevor switched his attention to Nathan, carefully inspecting this man who was so still and so watchfully remote. Trevor saw that he was slender and whiplike, that his eyes were incredibly blue and deceptively mild.

Still smiling, he said, "I'm sorry you filed on this land and went to the trouble of building a house."

Nathan leaned against the post and looked at the man, showing no interest and making no reply.

"This is cow country," Trevor went on. "Some day the hoeman may push us out, but that time is far off. We can't afford to let a thing like this yet started. Not now."

Nathan said quietly, "You're a little late telling me."

"I've just got back from a drive down to Wichita," Trevor explained, still smiling.

He walked over and put five gold pieces down on the porch. He said, "Talk don't amount to much. This will pay you for the work you've done. Pack up and move out—and save yourself a lot of trouble."

INSIDE the house, Linda heard the change in the man's tone and it turned her cold. She had a knowledge of such flat, unemotional words—and of the depth of their meaning.

Quietly she lifted Nathan's Sharps rifle from its rack and turned to the front window. Kneeling, she laid the heavy weapon across the bed and drew back the hammer. The click of that was loud against the sudden stillness outside, and through the thin curtains Linda could see Trevor glance to the window.

Knowing that they could not see her, Linda shifted the rifle until its high, blunt sight centered just above Trevor's belt buckle. She waited like that, her finger light upon the trigger.

Nathan's footsteps made four slow, evenly spaced sounds against the porch floor. Then she saw his arm reach down and pick up the coins. With one easy, unhurried movement he pitched the money back to Trevor, scattering it so that some of it struck against the Twin-T owner before falling to the ground.

Trevor's eyes turned hard and ugly, but his smile remained. He said, "That was a mistake, my friend," and motioned for one of his men to pick up the money.

With the gold returned to his pocket, he stood there, jingling the coins and looking at Nathan.

Down by the corral a horse snorted, and from the rear of the house Betty called, "Mommy, come here, Mommy."

Linda said, "Just a minute, dear," and was astonished at the natural sound of her voice, for her tongue felt stiff and dry.

Trevor kept jingling the coins in his pocket and staring at Nathan. Linda felt a high, quick pride in the wisdom and fortitude that held Nathan so calm in the face of this mute and goading challenge.

After a while, Trevor too saw something of this patience and strength. He said, "Anything else, Riley?"

"It's your game—and your move," Nathan said.

Trevor laughed. "Not now, nester. Later."

He wheeled away and his men stepped aside, then followed him to the corral.

Linda let out a quivering breath and put her head down on the bed. Carefully she took her hands away from the rifle, her fingers trembling so that she dared not try to let the hammer down.

She was still like that when Nathan came into the house.

He crossed to her quickly and said, "Why, honey!" and lifted her up, holding her tight against his body and staring down at the cocked rifle lying across the bed.

From the kitchen, Betty called again. "Mommy, I've losted the soap. Come here, Mommy."

Nathan lifted Linda's head and brushed back a fallen lock of her dark hair. He said, "Mommy's coming, Betty."

Linda raised her face and kissed him, quickly and fiercely. Then she turned toward the kitchen.

A WEEK ran on, linking happy, undisturbed days at the Riley ranch. Then, one late afternoon, Nathan went down to the barn to milk and presently came back, mounted bareback on one of the mules.

"The cow didn't come up," he called to Linda, and rode down the valley in search of the strayed animal.

It was dark when Linda heard him ride in and put the mule away. Wordlessly he entered the kitchen door and hung the empty milk pail on its hook. He sat down

in a chair by the window, smoking and staring out at the high, pale shine of early stars.

Linda went easily and deftly about the task of preparing the meal, now and then letting her brief glance stray to him.

Finally Nathan said, "I found the cow She was dead."

Linda showed no surprise. "Mountain lion?" she asked.

He nodded and kept looking at the stars, saying no more.

Outside, small noises of the night began to rise and fall softly against the blackness. A breeze stirred the window curtains gently and raised a faint rustling along the valley.

Linda pushed the coffee pot to the back of the stove and took down a can from the highest shelf, upturning it and spilling coins to the kitchen table.

She said, "Count it and see if there's enough to buy another cow."

Nathan's protest came instantly. "But we saved that to buy clothes and shoes for you and Betty."

Linda laughed easily. "This is a case of inner comfort being more important than outer vanity. We can't get along without milk and butter."

Nathan grinned. He counted the money, said, "Yes, it's enough. We can go over to Long Valley tomorrow and buy one from Lars Petersen."

After that, he talked more than was his custom, going up to the bedroom and riding Betty to the table on his back when supper was ready. Later, playing with the child, his romping was a little too eager and his laughter too boisterous and frequent.

Linda watched all this and said nothing. But when the house was dark and silent, and Betty and Nathan had long since been asleep, she got up from her bed quietly and went back to the kitchen, lighting a lantern and taking it down to the barn.

The fresh cowhide, rolled into a heavy, compact bundle, was in the left-hand crib and she knelt down and spread it out, the feel of it cold and clammy against her fingers, and its odor lifting a flat, sickening stench.

The tear of a bullet showed plainly against the side of the skin and Linda stared at this a long time, letting her thoughts run on into the future, until she became tired from the weight of things encountered there.

Somewhere along the lower edge of the hills, a coyote sent a thin, quivering cry down to the valley, and one of the mules moved about restlessly, stamping its feet against the hard soil of the stall floor.

Linda rerolled the hide and walked slowly back to the house. She washed her hands with soft, yellow soap and put out the lantern. Quietly she went back to bed and lay there, thinking of man's greed and ruthlessness and cruelty; wishing that all these could be drawn into one small and fragile object so that she could cast it against the floor and so, in the aggregate, destroy these things forever.

Next morning, while the air was yet cold and thin, and when the first bright colors of the day showed only against the tall and stony summits, Nathan and Linda and Betty climbed into the big Conestoga wagon that had brought them from St. Joe. They drove across the Honelda range, then down to Long Valley and along it to Lars Peterson's place.

This was a lonely country, and the Petersens would have it no other way except that they stay for a meal and for talk. Returning, the cow made travel slow. And thus the sun lay deep in the west when they came to the crest of the Honeldas again.

Beneath them was the narrow-drawn run of the valley, and in the distance, the high, flat sweep of the mesa. Where these two intersected, a heavy column of smoke rose up toward the infinite heights, undisturbed and ominously dark against the still air of this quiet hour.

Betty said, "Look at the cloud coming out of the ground!"

NATHAN spoke a single word to the mules, stopping them. After that, the quality of Nathan's and Linda's silence reached the child, holding her still and a little awed.

Finally one of the mules stamped impatiently at a fly, setting up a harsh and metallic rattling of traces and breast-chains. Nathan stirred, spoke to the team, and drove down toward that pillar of gradually thinning smoke.

Betty said, in a loud whisper, "Is it our house, Mommy?"

Linda said, "Yes, dear," and stared straight ahead, afraid to look at Nathan lest she find in him a bitterness and defeat greater than her own. But when she had conquered this, and did look, she saw that his shoulders were squared and that there was nothing weak or beaten about the grim set of his features.

Instead, there was anger in him, deep and rash, and it showed in the bright, reckless glint of his eyes. This turned her thoughts into a new channel and to a new trouble while the wagon rolled on and on and finally stopped.

The barn and outbuildings lay as blackened squares upon the earth and only the clay-and-rock chimney rose, a tall, smoke-darkened monument.

Nathan got down from the wagon slowly and stood there, looking at all this and betraying no emotion. Yet Linda saw a faint sign of weariness in the way his gaze reached into the far distance and her lips and eyes softened into an almost maternal sympathy.

She got out of the wagon, lifted Betty down and, hand in hand, they went and stood beside Nathan.

Linda said, "The stove is still standing; I don't believe it's ruined."

Nathan drew a deep breath. "No, nothing fell on it." His speech was slow and his voice revealed nothing.

Presently he turned and looked at Linda, but she was staring up at the rise of the mountains, seeing nothing, yet finding this easier than meeting his eyes just now. Still, when he turned to her, he felt her soft, gentle compassion.

Beyond the blackened ruins of the house, the woodpile sprawled intact, and against one of the cottonwood poles the polished surface of an axe caught the weakening rays of the sun. Nathan picked up the axe and held it aloft.

Coming back across that interval, he swaggered a little, something gallant in his strong and dauntless smile.

"They made a mistake in leaving this," he said. "It built one house and it will build another. A bigger and a better one!"

Linda's spirits leaped up to meet his.

She said, "We lived in the wagon all the way from Missouri and we'll do it again, until the new house is finished. No mountain lion will drive us out of this valley."

Betty's eyes grew wide and round. "Did a lion burn our house?" she asked.

"Yes," Linda told her, "the same one that shot our cow."

Nathan's laughter was loud and clear, and the tense, dark spell broke and fell away, shattered by the sound of it.

LATER, when a campfire had been built, Linda remembered that there was corn in the wagon's feed-box. She parched two ears of this and Nathan milked the cow. On this frugal fare they made a meal, laughing about it and finding a strange happiness in their ability to do it.

After Betty was asleep, Linda and Nathan lay close together on the hard floor of the wagon. He held up his arms and flexed the muscles. "We're not so much worse off. These arms are stronger and these hands more skilled than when I began the first house. Somebody in Latoba will give us credit to last until the wheat is harvested."

Sunrise found them on the road again and they came to the little town of Latoba. Nathan stopped the wagon in the shade of

the locust trees alongside the feed barn.

Betty promptly said, "I want peppermints—will you get me some, Daddy?"

Linda saw his face change and felt compassion for him, knowing how a thing like this would embarrass a man.

She said quickly, "I'll see if there isn't a nickel or a dime in my purse for Betty; you go ahead with your business, Nathan."

Betty said, "Find the dime, Mommy, I want to get my peppermints."

Linda saw no point in continuing this deception by opening her empty purse. Without answering the child, she sat there, very still, watching Nathan go along the street, and sending up a wordless prayer that the merchants would not hurt him.

He went into Richardson's store, and after a while came out and crossed to Ed Wilkins' Emporium. Linda, watching him closely, thought that he moved slower and showed a faint hesitancy. And when he finally walked back toward the wagon, this change was more pronounced.

She put an accurate reckoning upon it, considering, with a woman's realism, how this would effect them. Yet when Nathan reached the wagon, he found her smiling.

He said, "They turned me down, Linda," the set of his features grim.

She said gently, "Tom Trevor was the cause of this; it wasn't because Wilkins and Richardson didn't trust you."

"Yes, that's true," he said, with a slight bitterness. "Wilkins was frank enough to admit it. I can see their side of it; the stores have to depend on the big rancher's trade, and—"

He came to an abrupt halt and wheeled about, staring across to where Tom Trevor and four of his riders had come out of the Cattlemen's Palace. They formed an indolent and insolent group beneath the wooden canopy of the saloon porch.

ONE step Nathan took away from the wagon, then stopped and stood very still, the wildness of his thoughts showing in the thin, somber set of his lips and the flush on his face.

On the saloon porch, Trevor sent his careless laughter boiling down the street. Nathan hitched up his gunbelt.

Linda said, "Nathan!"

He turned slowly and came back to the wagon, leaning against a wheel and looking up at her as if he were afraid to take his eyes off her face. This she saw and understood, and it filled her with a high pride.

Betty said, "I haven't got my peppermints—mommy didn't give me a dime."

In a tone barely above a whisper, Linda said, "We haven't any money at all."

Presently Nathan said, "I'll be back," and wheeled abruptly away.

Linda knew that he had gone out to the hopeless task of finding some kind of a job. She sat there and tried to think things out, but her mind persisted in running backward because there was so little ahead to hold it to any possible future plans.

After a while Betty got down from the wagon and began playing beneath the locust trees. Linda sat on, so deeply involved with her problems that John Kallis, from the Wells Fargo office, spoke to her a second time before she was aware of his presence.

Kallis said, "This letter for you came about a week ago. I saw Nathan go up the street just now and figured I'd find you down here somewhere."

She thanked him and took the letter, seeing instantly that it was addressed in her mother's small, precise script.

Rapidly she ran through the mother's long and detailed accounting of back-East news, catching the highlights and holding over the other for a more leisurely and contemplative consideration. Catching, too, distant and almost forgotten memories of a broad, deep harbor, sparkling in the sun, and of tall masts of schooners anchored there, rocking gently up and down; of shaded streets, with orderly rows of neat, painted houses, and the clean, salt-sweet smell of the sea.

For a moment she lifted her eyes from the letter and sat like that, hearing again the safe ringing clip-clop of horses' hoofs and dustless brick pavement.

That vagrant remembrance held her deeply, but she pulled herself away, returning her attention to the letter and reading on until one particular group of paragraphs held her very still:

> . . . your father has recently acquired Aaron Leinkler's interest in the hardware store and is now sole owner of that establishment. Young Al McKey is working for him, but the boy's services are far from satisfactory. And the thought has come to us that if, for any reason, you and Nathan should meet adversity or discouragement in the West, there is now a place here for you.
>
> Your father could pay Nathan quite adequately for working in the store, and there is a comfortable cottage on Concord Street which can be bought at a nice advantage.
>
> We hope that you and Nathan will consider this, because it is not a happy circumstance for our only daughter to be so far away. We often think how hard it is that we have never seen our little grand-daughter.
>
> We have no great amount of cash on hand, yet we have prospered considerably and your father is attaching to this letter an order which, if presented within one year to any Wells Fargo Express Company office, will provide you with ample funds to return home in comfort.
>
> We send it merely as insurance against financial emergency. . . .

"Mother and father don't know Nathan's ways, or the ways that I've learned from him," she said softly.

Her mind moved to the plans Nathan had made, recalling so poignantly the sweep of confidence and the run of laughter in his voice when they had discussed those high, fine hopes.

"This is a land where a man can stretch his arms and his ambitions as far as he pleases," Nathan had said. "Its strength is raw and ruthless and it has little sympathy for the weak. But for the strong, it has wealth and power and freedom far beyond the limits of the East. Those things are what I want for you and Betty, Linda. And we'll have them, too."

She was still thinking of that when she saw Nathan come around the end of the barn. Then her breath caught in a little gasp as Tom Trevor and two of his riders left the porch of the Cattlemen's Palace and deliberately crossed the street to block Nathan's way.

WHEN they were quite close, Nathan stopped. The four of them stood for a long moment, then Trevor said, "You couldn't get a dime's worth of credit in this town, could you?"

Nathan remained perfectly still, looking at the man and making no reply.

Trevor answered his own question. "No, you couldn't. And now you're figuring on going back to the valley and living off my herd until you can gather a measly little crop of wheat, feeding your family on stolen beef and trading the hides for enough flour to go with it."

Still Nathan said nothing. Trevor went on, his smile completely gone now. "Well, you ain't doing that, nester. You're busted and burned out and you're getting the hell away from here. You've always been mighty touchy for a sodbuster, and I don't reckon you'll like being ordered around. If you don't, you've got a gun buckled on. I'd just as soon kill you now as hang you later for a cow thief. Drag your gun any time you feel lucky!"

Nathan said mildly, "I've never been invited to shoot it out with three men before."

Without shifting his glance, Trevor said, "You fellows go on back."

The men turned and walked reluctantly away, leaving Nathan and Trevor alone on the street.

A little breeze gently stirred the lighter dust and touched the small leaves of the locusts to a faint rustling. Slowly Linda put her hand against her cheek and held it there, realizing that all her future hopes and happiness lay in this brief instant.

Trevor's elbow crooked a little and he shifted weight to his left foot. "Let's go," he said.

Nathan shook his head. "No, I'm not fighting you today."

Trevor's contempt was an instant and visible thing. "I did have some sympathy for you," he said, "but even that's gone now. Be out of town in thirty minutes. If you ever show up in this country again, I'll shoot you on sight."

Nathan said, "All right, Trevor." He walked around the Twin-T owner, his eyes on the dust of the street.

He hitched up the mules and lifted Betty to the seat, then climbed in and spoke to the team. The big wagon rolled and lurched clumsily out of town.

To Linda the next mile was an eternity. She recognized this as the end of a way, the fading of something bright and vital and beautiful. She knew that Nathan would never be the same again; she realized that some less sensitive men might survive and forget such an experience, but that this day would be with Nathan always, like an invisible barrier, forever to mute his laughter and isolate him from his old habits—and from her.

Self-blame, strong and bitter, weighed upon her. She fell to wondering if a man could sacrifice his natural manly impulses to a sense of responsibility until such impulses were lost through disuse. Her acceptance of this as a truth forced her mind to a conclusion.

This had settled itself into firm purpose when they came to where the stage road lay along the sun's path. Here was where a wagon might turn eastward, and eventually come to clean brick pavements and cool, shaded streets. And where a beaten man might live a smaller, but more protected life.

Linda said, "Stop a moment, Nathan." She gave him her mother's letter, keeping her face averted and offering no explanation or suggestion.

For a while he rattled the papers, moving from one page to another. Finally he held the letter still, looking at it intently and seeing nothing at all.

The silence was unbroken except for such small sounds as Betty made at her playing in the back of the wagon.

Then Nathan said, "Perhaps this would be the best way, after all," and Linda detected how careful he was to keep all color and all emotion out of his voice.

When she did not reply, he took out a handkerchief and wiped his face, speaking to the team and letting the wagon roll on.

DUST whipped up like the gray smoke of a smoldering fire and above its strong and acrid smell, Linda presently detected the sweet odor of peppermint.

She turned and looked at Betty and the child met her glance with a sly, half-humorous expression on her smeared and sticky face. She said, "Daddy did get my peppermints. The sack fell from his pocket when he took out his handkerchief."

Nathan said, "I'd forgotten all about it, honey," and tried to swing the conversation into another channel.

But Linda stopped him. She said, "How did you get the candy, Nathan? You had no money or credit."

He stirred uneasily and a flush darkened his cheeks. He said, "Wilkins let me have it."

Linda, who knew him so well, realized that this was not a whole truth. She searched his face carefully, finding nothing at all.

Then a quick suspicion touched her and impelled her to lean over and lift his gun from the holster.

He made one half-hearted attempt to stop this, then shrugged and turned his face away.

Linda drew the hammer of the big Colt halfway back, releasing the cylinder, then turned it, looking at each chamber. The gun was empty.

She said very slowly, "You traded your last six cartridges to Wilkins for those peppermints."

"Yes," he admitted, his uneasiness be-

coming more manifest. "I made a swap with him."

"And that was why you...?"

"Yes," he said again. And after a moment added, "It was a bad situation. . . . I was afraid."

Tears were in Linda's eyes, but she laughed and had the satisfaction of seeing that dispel some of his embarrassment and turn his lips to a faint grin.

They went on like that for a little way, then she said, "Let me drive, Nathan."

He gave her the lines. Immediately she swung the team off the trail and put them into a long, curving turn across the flat floor of the desert, heading back toward Latoba. Nor did she answer the mute question in his eyes.

They went back into town silently and again stopped beneath the locust trees. Linda said, "Wait for me here," and walked across to Richardson's store.

She was back in five minutes and Nathan, watching her so closely, immediately saw a mark encircling one finger, the white skin exposed now that her gold wedding ring was gone.

She followed his glance and said, without smiling, "I made a trade, too."

She put a small, paper-wrapped package on the wagon seat and lifted Betty down, taking her hand and moving quickly back across the street, going into the Emporium this time.

Nathan watched her until she was out of sight, then opened the package, showing no surprise when he found it to be a box of .45 cartridges.

He said, "A man couldn't ever go far wrong with one like her." Slowly and deliberately he broke open the box, filling his gun and empty belt loops.

INSIDE the Emporium it was semi-dark and there was a lingering dampness and coolness from the sprinkled floor, rich with smells of leather and merchandise.

Ed Wilkins came forward and said, "Is there something I can do for you, Mrs. Riley?"

She said, "No. No, thank you."

He fell into conversation with Betty and the child followed him deeper into the store, leaving Linda standing rigidly by the window and inexplicably relieved that she could wait out this interval alone.

The thought came to her that time has little significance in itself, depending almost entirely upon events or circumstances for

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its impression upon the human mind, and that the measure of its flight is a thing of incredible elasticity: long in misery and pain and loneliness, short in happiness and contentment.

And thus these minutes stretched out for her until their run was not to be reckoned, and until finally gunfire crashed along the street, setting up echoes that preceded a silence so complete that it turned Linda cold and incapable of either movement or words.

She was dimly aware that Betty had come to her and was tugging at her skirt, asking some question over and over with childlike persistency; that Ed Wilkins had rushed out and down the street; that the store was empty—and that Nathan had not come back. . . .

There were, after a while, hurried steps on the porch outside and she forced herself to take a step forward. Then she stopped and watched Wilkins rush in through the door.

He said, "Tom Trevor drew on your husband, ma'am, and Nathan had to kill him. Then one of the Twin-T riders made the same mistake and now Doc Harston is probing around in him for a bullet."

Linda said, "But Nathan—is he hurt?"

Wilkins said, "Forgive me, I was kinda excited. No, ma'am, Nathan ain't hurt. Didn't get a scratch!"

"But where is he?"

Wilkins said, "Things took a right queer turn, ma'am. A bunch of hoemen were in town and when Trevor tried to kill Nathan, they began to drag out shotguns and round up every Twin-T man in the Palace. Nathan's up there now, trying to talk them out of having a sort of general necktie party."

Linda moved slowly to the counter then, putting her hands against it to steady herself.

Betty said, "What's the matter, Mommy—are you sick?"

Linda said, "No, dear."

She sat down and drew a long breath, feeling tautness run out of her body and leave it trembling.

But she was calm and quiet when Nathan came in and put his arms around her. She thought: If he had been killed, I would never have felt his body warm against me again, and it would have been my fault.

She smiled at him. "Are you ready to go now?"

He said, "Yes," and helped her up.

Ed Wilkins said, "Wait a minute." He came over and put his hand on Nathan's arm. "Today is going to mark a change in this country. Hoemen are going to stand up for their rights here, and other nesters'll come in. Hell, this land will raise the best winter wheat in the world and it's the farmers who'll spend their money in Latoba. I aim to stay on in business, and I'm getting ready for tomorrow by starting a new system today. I got merchandise for sale and your credit's always good. You and Mrs. Riley look around and pick out what you want."

Finally the big Conestoga was loaded and once more rolling out of town, and Betty had a new and larger sack of peppermints. Then the stage road, stretching its distant way from east to west, was before them again.

Nathan said, "I'm afraid the turn of things made me forget about your letter." He shook his head. "It seems a year ago since we stopped out here and read it and—and decided where we were going."

Linda smiled at him. "Would you like for me to drive again?"

He said, "Yes, that's exactly what I want you to do."

And so, once more they came to the intersection and Linda made her choice and turned the team; turned it so that the morning sun was against the back of the wagon, and so that the mules plodded steadily on toward where winter wheat land lay waiting to be broken, and where a burned ranch house showed its blackened ruins. ● ● ●

The Man Behind the Star

By WILLIAM HEUMAN

Slidell was pinned there.

Maybe it was a good thing that he wasn't like Handsome Billy Gibbs, Grant City's two-gun marshal, Sheriff Carrigan thought. Because this way, no one expected anything of him—neither the town, nor his girl, nor the killer who now waited for him to back down.

AT FOUR-THIRTY in the afternoon a fly buzzing around the nose of Sheriff Tom Carrigan awakened him. He sat up on the pool table, scratching his nose, yawning, and then he lowered his boots to the floor, put his hundred and ninety pounds into the boots, and

stood up. He was six feet two inches tall, and the high-heeled boots elevated him still more.

His gunbelt lay on the pool table, the muzzle of the Colt .44 resting in one of the side pockets. He picked up the belt, strapped it on, and then for the first time became aware of the little commotion outside in the main barroom. He'd heard the sounds before, the heavy, argumentative talk of men at their drinking. At a bar with a glass in their hands men argued about many things, and he was accustomed to sounds like that. He'd fallen asleep an hour earlier in this back room of the Pleasant Hour bar, listening to two men argue over the merits and demerits of U.S. Grant, who had just started his second term as President of the United States.

This was more than light argument now. The voices were raised, strident, alone in their anger, which meant that very shortly there would be an explosion either with fists or with guns.

Tom Carrigan grimaced as he tightened the gunbelt around his lean waist and moved toward the door. He was tall, and when he walked he took long, easy strides which made it appear as if he were just loafing along, but he always reached the place he wanted to go with deceptive speed.

At this off-hour of the afternoon the bar was empty save for four men. Two of them were small, brown-faced Texans who'd probably come in the day before with a trail herd. They'd had time for a shave, haircut and bath, and both of them wore new shirts.

The third man at the bar was Wilson Moran, the livery stable owner, a heavy-set man with a florid face and a quick temper. Moran was arguing with a red-headed, freckle-faced youngster who'd had more drinks than he could take and still think clearly.

They were facing each other at the bar, Moran's thick, stubby fingers gripping a half-empty liquor glass, the redhead with one hand on the bar and the other hanging at his side. He wore a Smith & Wesson .44. Moran was armed, too. Tom Carrigan knew that the livery stable man always carried a Navy Colt under his coat. He could see the bulge of it.

JIM WEATHERBY, the bartender, looked relieved when Tom came through the door and sauntered toward the bar. Weatherby was a fat man, semi-bald, with heavy white jowls. He stood a few feet from the two men, both chubby hands flat on the bar. The two Texans at the other end were grinning coldly, anticipating trouble.

The red-headed boy's pale blue eyes flicked to the silver star on Tom Carrigan's vest as Tom moved around to the rear of Moran, sliding a hand across the chunky man's shoulders before coming to rest at the bar, both elbows on the wood.

Tom looked at Jim Weatherby and winked gravely. He said, "Can't sleep in the jailhouse any more. All the drunks Gibbs put in there last night keep me runnin' errands for 'em. Always wastin' somethin'. Can't sleep here, neither, Jim. People arguin'."

"That's so," Weatherby grinned.

"Now you take an argument," Tom Carrigan went on, and he looked casually at his reflection in the bar mirror, brown eyes, thick black hair, a lean, smooth-shaven face, high cheekbones. "Two people make an argument," he said. "Two points o' view presented, both parties thinkin' they're right an' the other party is wrong. Funny part is that both can be right. What's the trouble, Wilson?"

"Damn fool here," Moran scowled, "tryin' to tell me Westboro has more people than Grant City."

Tom Carrigan looked at the red-headed youth around Wilson Moran's shoulder. "Just come up from Westboro, Red?" he asked.

"Passed by with a trail herd," the red-

head told him. "Ain't no reason why the damned railroad don't go down there. Bigger town, more people."

"Like hell," Moran snapped. "Twenty-seven hundred in Grant City now. There ain't fifteen hundred in Westboro."

Tom Carrigan poured himself a small drink from the bottle Jim Weatherby placed in front of him. He said thoughtfully, "That twenty-seven hundred, Wilson. That include all the damn fools who argue how big the town is?"

The bartender snickered softly, and the redhead grinned. Wilson Moran's anger was broken, although he still scowled. Tom said to him, deftly changing the subject, "That blue roan I brought in get over that lame leg, Wilson?"

He'd had the roan, one of Moran's hire horses, out for a ride two days before, and the animal had stepped into a gopher hole, coming up lame.

"You never could ride a horse right," Moran grumbled. "Still nursin' her along."

"Reckon I'm a walkin' sheriff," Tom Carrigan grinned.

"Wouldn't hurt none," one of the Texans at the end of the bar drawled, "if you started walkin' now, Sheriff."

Tom Carrigan turned his head. "How's that?" he asked pleasantly.

"Jeff Slidell's headin' this way, mister." The Texan grinned. "Saw him in Westboro two days ago. You know about Slidell, Sheriff?"

"Heard tell of him," Tom murmured. "Left-handed gunslinger. That right?"

"Better hide that badge when Slidell rides in," the Texan chuckled. "Tell me he eats sheriffs for breakfast every mornin'."

Tom Carrigan finished his drink and put the glass down. He rubbed the silver star with his cuff as he turned around and headed for the door.

"Don't worry me none, mister," he said. "I got Handsome Billy Gibbs for protection."

As he pushed out through the batwing doors, blinking into the bright sunlight just beyond the fringe of the porch, he saw the new town marshal, Billy Gibbs, seated on a wicker chair on the hotel porch across the road, holding sway before a half dozen townsmen.

Gibbs of the long, golden hair, and the expensive cigars, sat with his highly polished boots up on the porch railing, thumbs hooked in the pockets of his flower-embroidered vest, a broad smile on his smooth-shaven, handsome face.

HANDSOME BILLY lifted a finger to Tom Carrigan as Tom came down the steps of the Pleasant Hour and turned left toward the jailhouse. Billy Gibbs had blue eyes to go with the golden hair. He was as tall as Tom Carrigan, but not as wide in the shoulders. He wore a fawn-colored coat and riding pants to go with the flower-embroidered vest, and his Stetson was almost white in color.

He carried two guns on his hips, pearl-handled Colts he'd had specially made for himself, and he knew how to handle those guns, too. Tom Carrigan, along with a dozen other townsmen, had watched him shoot at tin cans in the vacant lot adjoining the Longhorn Saloon.

Along with his good looks, Handsome Billy Gibbs had a reputation that had preceded him up from El Paso way, and the town fathers had immediately offered him the job of city marshal, even though Tom Carrigan secretly did not feel that Grant City particularly needed a town marshal. Westboro had one, however, and Grant City had to keep up with Westboro.

Tom Carrigan acknowledged Gibbs' greeting with a nod of the head. He walked leisurely down to Calhoun Street, and then turned left. The sheriff's office and the jailhouse were a few doors down Calhoun.

The dozen-odd prisoners Handsome Billy had hauled in the night before were

all clamoring for attention when Tom Carrigan came in. They were spread out in four cells, and Tom came down the aisle to stare at them moodily, remembering the days when these cells had been empty nightly, except for the occasional visits of Stewart St. Clair, who was now in No. 2 cell, sitting on the edge of a bunk, much the worse for wear.

Tom said to him, "Reckon you'd like a pick-me-up, Mr. St. Clair. That right?"

Stewart St. Clair was Lucy St. Clair's father and a gentleman, an ex-lawyer who, to solace himself and forget his fall from the high places, went on occasional drinking sprees, usually warning Tom Carrigan in advance when he was about to start out so that the sheriff of Grant City could reserve a cell for him.

Stewart St. Clair was a little man with gray hair and weak, watery blue eyes. A quiet, almost timid man when sober, when drunk he was even more quarrelsome than the stubborn Wilson Moran, lacking Moran's toughness and strength to go with it. Tom Carrigan had been in the habit of picking him up bodily in the middle of one of these drinking sprees, and carrying him to the safety of the cell. Sobering up the next day, Mr. St. Clair would thank him courteously and leave.

Mr. St. Clair said quietly, "You bring me in last evening, Tom?"

"Gibbs," Tom told him. "You an' the rest of 'em."

Handsome Billy loved to bring in drunks, to rough them up before a crowd, slapping his long-barreled Colt guns across their skulls if they resisted, and hoping they'd resist him.

Quite a few of the overnight prisoners had bumps and bruises on them, although Tom noticed Mr. St. Clair did not. He knew why, too. Handsome Billy had already met Lucy, and he knew about her father. He'd handled St. Clair with particular care in order to ingratiate himself in Lucy's eyes.

Stewart St. Clair sat on the edge of the bunk, rubbing his thin neck with his hands, looking at the floor, while the other prisoners put up a persistent clamor. One of them wanted coffee, another wanted a can of beer, and a third was hungry. All of them were out of tobacco, and they wanted him to step across the street to the cigar store to get some.

Old Man Clancy, a fairly regular inhabitant of Cell 3, stood against the bars, shaking a little. He said, "Tom—Tom, boy."

Tom Carrigan went over to him. "In another hour," Tom said, "everybody's out. What's an hour."

"In an hour," old Tom Clancy said moodily, "I could be dead, Tom. You know what I need."

Tom Carrigan scratched his jaw. Clancy needed a bracer to steady him. He had the shakes now, and in his condition an hour was like a week.

WALKING out to the office, Tom opened a locker and took down a bottle and a glass. He came down the aisle with it, stopping in front of Cell 3, where he poured the drink. Old Man Clancy gulped it down, his eyes shining. "You get my vote, Tom boy," he said. "Every year you get my vote."

"Obliged," Tom Carrigan murmured. He said to Mr. St. Clair, "How about it, Mr. St. Clair?"

"I'm all right now, Tom," the lawyer told him. "Thank you."

The others put up a wail as Tom left with the bottle. He came back then, scowling, and said, "No liquor, boys, but who wants tobacco?"

When he came back from the cigar store, several sacks of tobacco in his hands, Lucy St. Clair was sitting in his chair in the office, tapping one small foot on the rough board floor.

Tom Carrigan took off his hat. He flushed a little, the way he always flushed when he met Lucy. He said awkwardly,

with a feeble attempt at humor, "Howdy, ma'am. Waitin' for school to be out?"

Lucy St. Clair had gray eyes and ash-blond hair. The gray eyes were snapping as she looked at him. For six years Tom Carrigan had waited for her to grow up, and now that she was grown he didn't quite know what to do about it.

"Who put father in jail last night, Mr. Carrigan?" Lucy said grimly.

Tom moistened his lips. He looked down the corridor toward the cells, and then down at his boots. He said, "Marshal Gibbs."

"You put him up to it," Lucy accused stiffly.

Tom Carrigan gulped. "Your—your father always asks me to—to keep an eye on him, ma'am. I told Billy Gibbs that."

"Isn't it true," Lucy said tersely, "that you enjoy jailing poor innocent men who have a weakness for strong drink?"

"No, ma'am," Tom Carrigan murmured. "Reckon I like to keep this jailhouse empty."

It had usually been empty, too, until the town board decided they needed a town marshal to help him preserve order.

"When are the prisoners to be released?" Lucy snapped, and she emphasized the word, prisoners.

"Six o'clock, ma'am," Tom told her. "Ain't no reason to keep your father, though. He's a town man, an' these other chaps are loose riders. They ain't goin'—"

"We are not asking for special privileges," Lucy St. Clair informed him grimly. "I'll wait."

"Yes, ma'am," Tom Carrigan muttered.

He went back with his sacks of tobacco, and the prisoners greeted him with wild yells. When he came back again to the outer office, Lucy St. Clair said tersely, "Were you beating them again?"

"No, ma'am," Tom Carrigan scowled.

That was when Handsome Billy Gibbs came through the door. Gibbs had undoubtedly seen Lucy turn down the street to the jailhouse, and he'd dragged himself away from his worshipers.

Billy Gibbs had a warm, congenial smile on his face. He'd taken his creamy hat off when he came in, and the late afternoon sun, streaming in through the open door, reflected on his long, golden hair. His voice was soft, modulated, as he spoke, a trace of Southern accent in the tones.

"Saw you comin' in, Miss St. Clair," he said. "Can I be of assistance?"

HE DIDN'T even look at Tom Carrigan, and Tom had the feeling that he'd suddenly been transformed into a piece of the office furniture. He didn't like it, and he didn't like Handsome Billy Gibbs. Leaning back against the wall, he started to roll a cigarette, and he watched Lucy's face, seeing the interest there, not liking that either.

"I'm waiting for my father, Mr. Gibbs," Lucy stated.

Billy Gibbs nodded sympathetically, and then for the first time he looked in Tom Carrigan's direction, an almost accusing expression on his face, as if Tom had been completely responsible for Stewart St. Clair's incarceration.

"Sheriff Carrigan asked me to bring your father in, ma'am, if he became troublesome," he said.

"If he got himself into trouble," Tom corrected grimly.

Handsome Billy frowned at him. "Reckon I misunderstood," he stated blandly. "Your father, ma'am, was about to be molested by two Texas gun-throwers. I led him away for his own protection."

"I understand perfectly, Marshal," Lucy smiled.

Tom Carrigan's cigarette broke in his fingers as he was rolling it. Disgustedly, he threw the remnants into the spittoon. Lucy St. Clair looked at him disapprovingly.

"A law officer," Billy Gibbs was saying solemly, "is sometimes forced to take mea-

sures of which he does not approve, ma'am."

Like slugging a drunk over the head with a .45? Tom Carrigan wondered bitterly.

He went over and stood in the doorway, rolling another cigarette, looking up and down the street, listening to Billy Gibbs' soft voice behind him, going on and on.

At six o'clock he went down the corridor, unlocked the cells, and let his prisoners come out. Lucy St. Clair walked off with her father, who was still a little dazed.

Billy Gibbs stood in the doorway, watching her go, and he was smoking one of his fragrant Havana cigars now. There was the expression on his smooth, tanned face of a cat contemplating a bowl of rich cream.

"A very fine girl," Handsome Billy murmured as he turned around to look at Tom Carrigan. "How long have the St. Clairs lived in this town, Sheriff?"

"Lucy was born here," Tom informed him evenly. "She's not the kind you'll find in El Paso, Mr. Gibbs."

"That's true," Billy Gibbs smiled. "Fortunately, true."

Tom Carrigan wanted to hit him squarely between the eyes, and he wondered how Handsome Billy would react to such an affront. He glanced down at the two guns on Gibbs' hips, one of them a totally unnecessary part of his equippage. He'd never met a two-gun man in his life who was worth his salt. One man working one gun steadily and coolly could blast a two-gun man to hell while he was spraying lead all over creation.

He wondered how tough Billy Gibbs was with all of his talk, and all of his target shooting, and then he said casually, "You ever hear tell of Jeff Slidell, Gibbs?"

Billy Gibbs had been thinking along totally different lines, but the mention of Slidell jerked him back to the present. His pale blue eyes flicked, and then narrowed. Tom Carrigan watched him slide the tip of his tongue across his lips before answering. "What about Slidell?"

"Comin' up this way," Tom observed. "Tell me he's a rough man with a sixgun, especially on lawmen."

He was still watching Gibbs' eyes carefully, and then he knew. Billy Gibbs could be tough with defenseless drunks, and he could be very smooth with women, but he wasn't as tough as he pretended to be, and most of his shooting had been confined to tin cans in a vacant lot. A tin can didn't shoot back.

"Who says Slidell is comin' this way?" Billy Gibbs murmured.

"Just talk," Tom smiled. "Been tellin' the boys you'd protect me, Billy. I ain't much with a gun. Mostly talk with me."

Billy Gibbs looked at him quickly, not quite sure if the sheriff meant it or not. He muttered, "Slidell won't bother us much, Carrigan. Reckon I wouldn't worry about him."

"Ain't worryin' at all," Tom drawled. "Slidell knows I don't have a reputation with a gun. Wouldn't mean nothin' for him to knock me over."

Handsome Billy Gibbs thought about that, and it wasn't pleasant thinking. He was frowning as he toyed with the gold watch chain across his flower-embroidered vest. The guns on his hips didn't seem so big any more.

"We'll see," Billy murmured, and he went out.

Tom Carrigan sat on the edge of his desk, grinning for a long time after Handsome Billy disappeared through the open doorway. He had the feeling that Gibbs was in for a pretty rough time after Slidell rode in.

SLIDELL turned up in Grant City the following noon, riding a drab gray horse, and he was a drab little man himself, dressed in rather seedy black. To Tom Carrigan, watching over the batwing doors of the Pleasant Hour saloon, he

looked more like a down-at-the-heels lawyer than a gunslinger with a long list of killings to his record.

He had small hands and small boots, and when he dismounted in front of the Grant City Hotel and went up the steps he walked with his left shoulder hoisted a little, which made it appear as if his head were cocked to one side in an attitude of listening.

Jim Weatherby, the bartender, who stood beside Tom, said softly, "Don't look like much, does he, Tom?"

"We'll see," Tom murmured. "Where's Gibbs?"

"Ain't seen him today," Weatherby told him. "Be somethin' when them two meet. Fastest gunhands in the west."

"That's so," Tom Carrigan nodded.

Across the street, the hotel porch where Billy Gibbs usually sat was empty. They watched Jeff Slidell go into the hotel, and then Tom returned to the bar and the newspaper he'd been reading.

It wasn't until four o'clock in the afternoon that he met up with Billy Gibbs. The ashtray on the desk in the sheriff's office was half filled with cigar butts, and Handsome Billy sat behind the desk, boots up on the desk top, pretending an indifference he did not feel.

"Catching up on a little sleep," he told Tom.

Tom Carrigan glanced down at the cigar butts, a twinkle in his eyes. "You smoke while you sleep?" he asked blandly.

Billy Gibbs frowned at him, and Tom said, "You hear Slidell rode in today?"

Gibbs lit up another cigar. "That right?" he murmured.

"People in this town," Tom went on, "are layin' bets. Odds are four to three on Slidell."

He watched Billy Gibbs' face turn a sickly yellow color. "What are they bettin' on?" he asked weakly.

"You," Tom smiled, "an' Slidell."

Gibbs didn't say anything. He puffed almost feverishly on the cigar to get it going, and then he rubbed it out in the ashtray for some inconceivable reason.

"Luck," Tom Carrigan said, and he went out.

Back on main street he met Lucy St. Clair coming out of Hoffman's dry goods store, several packages under her arm. He slowed down, touched his hat, and said, "Reckon I'm going your way, Lucy, if them packages are heavy."

"They're not heavy," Miss St. Clair said icily.

Tom Carrigan fell in step with her anyway. "How's your father?" he asked.

"Father is as well as can be expected after the treatment he received in your horrid jailhouse."

Tom blinked. "Our overnight prisoners get along all right," he said defensively.

"Have you left off beating them?" Lucy St. Clair asked him sardonically.

"Hah!" Tom Carrigan mumbled.

SHE left him at the corner, and he went up on the porch of the Texas Saloon to talk with her father, who was sitting in a wicker chair, staring straight ahead of him.

Stewart St. Clair said quietly, "Sheriff, I may need a little assistance this evening."

Tom Carrigan scatched his head. "Reckon this is pretty quick, Mr. St. Clair. Ain't you feelin' right?"

"Very bad," Mr. St. Clair told him.

"I'll keep an eye out for you, Mr. St. Clair," Tom told him dubiously.

As he stood on the porch he watched Jeff Slidell come out of the hotel door across the way and stand on the porch for a few moments, looking up and down the street.

Mr. St. Clair said, "Who is that, Tom?"

"Jeff Slidell," Tom told him. "Famous gunman from Texas."

St. Clair didn't say anything. He continued to stare moodily straight ahead of him. Tom watched Slidell come down the steps and cross the road to the Pleasant

Hour Saloon. Halfway across, Slidell's eyes shifted over to the porch of the Texas Saloon. He slowed down a little as he noticed the star on Tom's vest, and then he came on again, a little man with a big gun on his hip, and an even bigger reputation to go with the gun.

Tom Carrigan stepped off the porch and headed for the Pleasant Hour. Pushing through the batwing doors, he saw Slidell standing alone at the far end of the bar, half facing the door, Slidell set his glass down on the bar as Tom came in and started towards him.

The Pleasant Hour was quite empty at this hour. Jim Weatherby stood a few yards from Slidell, staring at him as if fascinated. There were two other drinkers at the opposite end of the bar. They, too, were looking in Slidell's direction.

Tom pulled up next to the gunman. He smiled down at the little man, noticing the color of his eyes, a greenish-gray, narrow eyes with utterly no emotion in them.

"Mr. Slidell?" Tom asked.

"Looking at him," Slidell murmured.

"Heard about you," Tom Carrigan nodded. "I'm sheriff of Grant City."

Jeff Slidell's eyes shifted to the silver star on Tom's vest. He said, "Lawman." He said it with the same feeling with which he would have said, "Door post."

"This is an open town, Mr. Slidell," Tom smiled. "I don't believe in makin' a man turn in his guns when he hits Grant City."

"That right?" Slidell murmured, and there was the ghost of a smile around the corners of his thin mouth.

"On the other hand," Tom went on coolly, "we don't like a man to be too damned free with those guns, either."

"That a warning?" Jeff Slidell asked softly.

"That's advice," Tom Carrigan explained. "Good afternoon, Mr. Slidell." He put his back to the gunman as he went out through the door.

AT NINE-THIRTY that night Tom Carrigan had to step in between Mr. Stewart St. Clair and a squat, ugly Mexican who had supposedly insulted him. At ten-fifteen he led Mr. Stewart St. Clair, personally, out of the Longhorn Saloon as Mr St. Clair was about to climb over the bar and tangle with one of the bartenders.

Outside, Tom said to him desperately, "Mr St. Clair, the night's still young. You'll have to catch hold of yourself."

Stewart St. Clair was not to the point of drunkenness where he could be led off peacefully as at other times, and to force him at this early hour of the evening meant that Tom would have to pick him up bodily with the little man fighting all the way, and that would not look nice in the eyes of Mr. St. Clair's daughter.

"I'm all right, Sheriff," Mr. St. Clair said with dignity. "I know when to stop."

Tom Carrigan could have questioned that statement, but he let it go. He said, "You seen Billy Gibbs around tonight, Mr. St. Clair?" He was wondering if it were possible to maneuver Gibbs into handling the belligerent ex-lawyer, thus taking the blame for any mishaps that might ensue.

"Mr. Gibbs was at my house when I left," Mr. St. Clair stated.

Tom Carrigan considered this darkly. Handsome Billy was still staying under cover, hoping that Jeff Slidell would eventually leave before an issue could be created between the two of them.

"That's a hell of a marshal for you," he growled.

He'd been hoping that Slidell could send Billy Gibbs to another part of the state, but it was evident Gibbs intended to play it safe and smart, turning up again after Slidell pulled out, pretending he'd been busy elsewhere. At the same time Billy Gibbs was making hay at the St. Clair house while he, Tom Carrigan, did double duty in town.

He left Stewart St. Clair in a chair in front of the Longhorn, knowing he

wouldn't stay there very long. Drink did strange things to the little man.

At eleven-thirty Tom found him back in the Pleasant Hour, seated at a card table with Jeff Slidell and two other players. Jim Weatherby spotted Tom coming through the door, and he motioned frantically toward that corner of the room where the game was going on.

Tom Carrigan took one look, and then stepped out on the porch again. Mr. St. Clair had nearly approached his limit, which meant that he was ready to explode. This, of course, would precipitate another explosion on the part of the deadly Jeff Slidell, and Mr. St. Clair would spend the night on a slab in the coroner's shack.

That was when the inspiration hit. Going down the steps two at a time, Tom headed north to Fremonte Street, turned left, and halfway down the block came to the St. Clair house. He found Lucy rocking in a chair on the porch which was partly covered with vines, and Handsome Billy Gibbs seated on the top step, his cream-colored hat in his hands, golden head back against the porch upright.

BILLY GIBBS put the hat on when he saw Tom coming up the walk from the gate. Lucy St. Clair stopped rocking, and there was a moment of silence.

"Missed you in town tonight, Billy," Tom said evenly.

"Night's young," Gibbs informed him. "Reckon I'll be around if there's trouble."

"Trouble now," Tom observed blandly. "Mr. St. Clair has been drinkin' heavily, an' he's in a card game with Jeff Slidell. Hell might break loose any minute, Billy." He glanced up at Lucy then, touched his hat, and said, "Evening, Miss St. Clair."

"Who is Mr. Slidell?" Lucy asked quickly.

"Toughest gunman in the Southwest," Tom Carrigan stated. "Fifteen killings to his credit—far as we know. Might be much more." He glanced down at Billy Gibbs, and he said softly, "Figured you might like to get Mr. St. Clair out o' there, Billy. Slidell's too fast with a gun for me."

"You're a coward," Lucy snapped.

"Yes, ma'am," Tom murmured, "a livin' one, too. You want to take him, Billy? This is your style."

Billy Gibbs was still seated on the porch step, seated as if he were nailed there, his hat pulled low over his eyes. He managed to say, "Where are they, Sheriff?"

"Pleasant Hour," Tom told him, "an' there ain't too much time to waste, Billy. Mr. St. Clair ain't himself when he's drinkin'. He might say somethin', or do somethin'."

"You're a coward," Lucy St. Clair said tersely. She was standing up. "You're a coward, Tom Carrigan."

"Yes, ma'am," Tom nodded. "I'll wait outside for you, Billy," he said. "I'll be there in case somebody else tries to butt in."

"Yeah," Handsome Billy Gibbs muttered. He looked back at Lucy, noticing for the first time that she was standing up. He got up too, hastily, and he straightened his hat.

"We'd better go," Tom said.

"Coward," Lucy taunted.

"Yes, ma'am," Tom Carrigan nodded. He waited for Billy Gibbs.

They went down the walk together, and Tom opened the gate for him solicitously. As they were walking up Fremonte to Main, Tom glanced back and saw Lucy St. Clair following them.

"Not too much time," Tom said. "You know Slidell. He won't take much, Billy."

"No," Billy Gibbs said, his voice sounding strangled.

They turned the corner at Main and headed down toward the Pleasant Hour saloon, Tom Carrigan trying to walk fast. But Gibbs' legs didn't want to go fast.

They passed one saloon after the other, catching the whiff of beer and tobacco smoke coming from each one. Glanc-

ing back again, Tom noticed that Lucy was still coming, almost running to keep up with them.

"Got both your guns?" Tom asked once.

"Yes," Gibbs muttered. It didn't sound like Gibbs.

"Might need both of 'em tonight," Tom murmured. "You know Slidell is left-handed? Damned bullets come from the wrong side."

Gibbs didn't say anything to that. They were within fifteen yards of the Pleasant Hour now, and Gibbs suddenly increased his pace. He was almost running as he went on past the saloon, turning up the alley that led to the Emerald Livery Stable, and the big dapple gray he rode.

LUCY ST. CLAIR came up and stood beside Tom Carrigan. She was staring at the livery stable alley, unable to say a word. Then she said in a weak voice, "Where has he gone, Tom?"

"Reckon he's gonna ride for help," Tom Carrigan said casually. "Hell, that means I have to go in there myself."

Lucy didn't say anything for the moment. She was still looking toward the alley. Tom Carrigan said thoughtfully, "Wish to hell I wasn't a coward. Pretty hard on a man who's afraid o' his own shadow."

Then he started up the steps.

Lucy St. Clair called suddenly, "Tom!"

Tom stopped and turned around. "Ma'am?" he asked.

"Be—be careful," Lucy stammered.

Tom Carrigan grinned. "Allus was," he murmured, "Reckon that's been my trouble, ma'am."

He went into the Pleasant Hour and passed through the crowd until he came to the corner table at which Stewart St. Clair sat. Slidell had his back to the wall, facing the door. He looked up as Tom approached, and his dead eyes slid to the silver star. Again there was that faint smile on his face.

Tom bent down and put a hand on Mr. St. Clair's shoulder. He said, "Time to go, Mr. St. Clair."

Jeff Slidell had been shuffling the cards, preparing to deal them. He looked up at Tom, and then at the stoical Stewart St. Clair on the opposite side of the table. Mr. St. Clair didn't say anything. Slidell said, "Why?"

Tom Carrigan smiled at him. "Little affair between Mr. St. Clair an' myself," he stated. "You ready, Mr. St. Clair?"

The little man said flatly, "No."

Tom Carrigan sighed. He started to gather up Mr. St. Clair's chips to cash them in at the bar. Jeff Slidell purred, "You heard what he said, mister."

"Reckon I ain't hearin' good tonight," Tom smiled. He did hear the silence come into the big barroom. All eyes were turned in their direction. The two men who'd been in the game with St. Clair and Slidell suddenly got up and walked away. Other card players at nearby tables found it advisable to terminate their games and move to the other end of the bar room.

Jeff Slidell said softly, "You're crowdin' me, lawman."

He'd put the cards down on the table, and his small hands lay on the table on either side of the card deck, palms down. Tom Carrigan noticed that the small finger on the right hand was missing.

Tom said to Stewart St. Clair, "We'll take a little walk, Mr. St. Clair."

"Go away, lawman," Jeff Slidell murmured.

Tom Carrigan looked across at him still smiling. He'd dropped the chips in his pocket, and he had his hands on the edges of the table as he stood beside Mr. St. Clair. He heaved at the table suddenly, driving it into Slidell's breastbone, smashing him back up against the wall.

As he did so, he reached forward quickly, grabbing the little gunman's hands before he could drop them below the table top. Then he put his weight against the

table and applied the pressure. He had Slidell pinned against the wall with the table, the table rim wedged against his chest, and he saw the fear come into the man's eyes as the pain increased.

LOOKING down at him, Tom Carrigan sensed the fact that never in his life had anyone physically manhandled Jeff Slidell. The fear of his gun kept them at a distance. He was not accustomed to being roughed up, and it was a shock to him. The terrible pain in his chest sent the fear rushing to his eyes for the first time in his life.

"Let up," he choked.

"You have one hour to leave town," Tom said grimly, "an' you better go, mister."

Then he brushed the table aside, jerked the little man to his feet, and lifted the gun from the holster under his coat. Grasping Slidell by the coat collar, he sent him spinning in the direction of the saloon doors. The little gunman staggered, fell to his knees, and then got up again. He stood there, all of his dignity gone, just a drab little man without a gun, and with the fear in his eyes.

He rubbed his sore chest, stared at Tom Carrigan, and then as Tom started walking toward him, he broke for the door, going through on the run.

Tom followed him outside and stood on the porch, watching Slidell stumble across the road and up into the alley adjoining the hotel. He had his horse stabled behind the hotel.

Lucy St. Clair stood on the walk below, looking up at Tom. A patch of yellow light from one of the saloon windows fell across her.

"Was that Mr. Slidell, Tom?" she asked slowly.

"Reckon that was him," Tom murmured. "He's leavin' Grant City."

"Thank you, Tom," Lucy said softly.

Tom Carrigan rubbed his jaw. He said, "Goin' back in for your father now. There's a rocker on your porch, Lucy. You be sittin' in it when I get there. Understand?"

"I understand," Lucy St. Clair told him.

Tom turned to go back inside, and Lucy called after him softly. "Tom."

He paused with one big hand on top of the swinging door.

"Don't be too long," Lucy St. Clair murmured. ● ● ●

THERE'S HELL OVER THE HUMP!

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BLACK JOHN and the SKY PILOT

Black John stared wide-eyed at the two forms sprawled on the ground....

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

The Reverend Ishmael Saunders was the strangest sky pilot the North Country had ever known: A man who liked his drink, played a sharp hand of stud—and kept a cold, steady eye on old Cush's gold safe!

OLD CUSH, proprietor of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading post and saloon that served the little community of outlawed men that had sprung up on Halfaday Creek, close against the Yukon-Alaska border, set out a bottle, two glasses and the inevitable leather dice box as Black John Smith crossed the floor

and elevated a foot to the battered brass rail. Picking up the box, the big man rattled the dice noisily, and rolled them out onto the bar. "I'm leavin' them three fives in one," he said.

Cush failed to beat the three fives, and took three shakes to collect three sixes which Black John promptly beat with four treys. As both filled their glasses, Cush pushed the square-framed, steel-rimmed spectacles from nose to forehead. "I seen a piece in that there newspaper Red John fetched up from Dawson where it tells how some perfesser name of Langley in Worshin'ton, er somewheres, went to work an' built him a flyin' machine."

"Flyin' machine, eh? Where did he fly to?"

"He didn't. They loaded this here machine, which it had a engine in it to make it go, on top of some kind of a boat an' anchored it out in some river. Then this fella gits in it, an' they starts the engine an' shoves the damn thing off'n the boat."

"Yeah—an' what happened?"

"Jest what anyone with any sense would know would happen—it fell in the river an' sunk. Looks like even a perfesser would have more sense than to figger he could fly."

"Oh, I don't know," the big man replied. "It ain't so damn long ago there wasn't any railroads, an' here only a month or so back there was a picture in the Police Gazette of some fella steerin' a horseless carriage down Fifth Avenue in New York. A man can't never tell about these inventions."

"Yeah, but railroads is built on the ground where they can't fall nowheres, an' them horseless carriages, too. But a flyin' machine—what the hell's goin' to hold it up in the air? Cripes, it's bound to fall down!"

"The sun an' the moon an' the stars stays up there, don't they? An' there's nothin' holdin' them up."

"Yeah, but they're a hell of a ways off—an' besides, how do you know they ain't nothin' holdin' 'em up? No one's ever seen the other side of 'em. They might be hangin' from somethin' solid that's so damn fur away you can't see it."

The big man grinned. "What would hold this theoretical solid thing up in the air?"

"How the hell would I know? But, at that, John, if anyone could fly it would save a hell of a lot of work. Look at the room he'd have to git around in. An' look at the time an' hard work he'd save. Cripes, he wouldn't have to foller no trail, or road, or paddle up some damn river, or climb up over no mountains. He could jest take off an' go straight to where he's goin'. You know, sometimes I git mad as hell watchin' the geese go by, way up there—slidin' along fast an' easy like."

The big man downed his drink and grinned. "I'm afraid it won't do you any good watching 'em, Cush. The life you've led—by no stretch of the imagination will you ever sprout wings."

"Yeah? Well, I don't see no pinfeathers stickin' out through your shirt, neither." He glanced toward the open door. "Here comes a Siwash. Wonder what he wants?"

The Indian stepped into the room, crossed the floor and paused beside Black John. "Dat tam you tak' de hooch man off Ladue Crick an' hang him, an' give us back de fur we trade for de hooch."

"Yeah. I remember. What about it? Didn't you get all your fur back? Or do you want him onhung so you can get some more hooch?"

"We git all de fur back. Dat damn good t'ing you hang um. You good mans—*kloshe talicum*. I'm like you good. Me, I'm fin' leetle crick. Ron into nudder crick. Ron into Pelly. I'm fin' gol'—*pil chickimin*." The man paused, produced a small moosehide sack and poured its contents onto the bar. Both Black John and Cush were impressed with the little pile of dust and nuggets.

"What's your name? An' how long did it take to pan this stuff out?" John asked.

"Nem Tom Big Axe. I'm work two day. Pick up de nuggets by de rocks in de rapids Pan de dus' in my frypan."

Cush slid the gold onto the scale. "Eleven ounces," he announced. "That's a hundred an' seventy-six dollars—without no shaft, jest snipin'."

"If you made this strike up the Pelly what are you doin' on Halfaday? Why didn't you hit for Dawson an' record your location?"

"Me, I'm like I'm pay you back for git all de fur back, dat tam. I'm show you de crick so mebbeso you stake claim by me Crick only so beeg for two claim. W'en day fin' out I'm tak' out mooch gol', mebbeso som' damn cheechako com' 'long an' tak' de odder claim. Mebbeso steal my gol' Mebbeso shoot me, tak' my claim. I'm lak you got dat claim. You hones' mans, Black John."

"Come on," Black John said, as the Indian pocketed his dust. "What are we waitin' for? Let's get goin'."

ONE EVENING ten days later, after a day spent in test panning and clawing about in the gravel in the bed of the tiny creek, Black John eyed the Indian. "We've got somethin' here, Tom," he said. "She's good—might even be damn good. We'll go pardners on this proposition. We can stake fifteen hundred feet in two Discovery claims —an' short as the crick is, that'll damn near take it in from one end to the other. In the mornin' we'll sock in our stakes. You stay here an' work the claims an' I'll hit out for Dawson an' record 'em. I'll leave you my rifle an' a box of shells, an you can make out with what grub we fetched along till I get back with more. I might be gone a couple of weeks, er even a couple of months. But I'll be back. Cache the stuff you take out, an' if anyone comes nosin' around tell 'em you ain't doin' no better'n wages."

At noon, several days later, paddling down the mighty Yukon, Black John landed on a gravelly point a few miles below the mouth of the White River, for lunch. As he stepped into the bush to gather wood for a boiling of tea, a gleam of white caught his eye, and peering through the underbrush, he saw a tent pitched in a tiny clearing at the foot of a huge rock. He called loudly and receiving no answer, pushed his way through the bush. A few moments later he stood at the edge of the clearing and stared wide-eyed at the two forms sprawled on the ground between the doorway of the tent and the remains of a tiny fire with an empty teapail lying on its side in the ashes. One of the men lay on his back, his face covered with blood that had gushed from a wound in his forehead, his hands still grasping a cocked rifle. The other lay on his belly, his face buried in a crooked forearm.

Dropping to his knees, Black John grasped the man's shoulder and turned him over. He rolled limply, and the next instant, tearing the man's shirt open, Black John detected a feeble heart beat, and exposed a bullet wound high up on the right side of the chest from which a few drops of blood oozed. Leaping to his feet, the big man crashed through the underbrush to his canoe, and lifting out his packsack, rummaged in it for a clean suit of underwear from which to rip a bandage. A smudge of smoke caught his eye, and a moment later a steamboat, paddle wheel churning, appeared around a bend, headed downriver. Stepping into the canoe, Black John paddled out and flagged her down. A few minutes later, the *Racket* nosed into the bank, and willing hands carried the wounded man aboard and placed him in a bunk. The dead man was also taken aboard, as was Black John and his canoe, and the steamer headed full speed for Dawson. There was no physician aboard, but between them, Black John and the captain did a creditable job of bandaging the wound after liberally smearing it with antiseptic salve.

Black John was the first to speak as the

two stood staring down at the man in the bunk. "Downey's got a murder on his hands now—an' a damn dirty one. These men were shot with a revolver. If it had been a rifle the bullets would have gone on through."

The captain nodded. "Yeah—two murders. This man will be dead before we hit Dawson. Cripes, you can't even see him breathe!"

"But his heart's still goin'. Maybe if we could get a little whiskey down him it might help."

"Hell, weak as he is he couldn't swaller! If we tried to get whiskey down him we might choke him to death."

"A shot of whiskey might keep his heart goin'," Black John persisted. "If he don't get it he'll die, anyway. For myself, I'd ruther choke to death on whiskey than lay in a bunk an' fade out like he's doin'. Hell, man—goin' that way, a man would never know he was dead! Go fetch a bottle an' we'll try to get some down him. If we can get him to the hospital Doc Sutherland'll fetch him around. He's cured fellas a damn sight deader'n this man is."

"We better thin it out with water," the captain said, as he handed Black John the bottle a few minutes later.

THE big man shook his head. "Nope. Weak as he is, he ain't goin' to swallow much anyhow—an' what he does get, the stronger the better." Holding the bottle close, he allowed a few drops to trickle into the open mouth. The man's throat moved slightly and for several minutes he continued to swallow feebly as the liquor trickled from the bottle.

"By God," the captain exclaimed, "if he ain't dead when we get to Dawson he'll be drunker'n hell!"

Black John held up the bottle and eyed its contents. "We got a damn good drink down him, anyhow." Placing his hand on the man's chest, he nodded. "His heart's picked up already. I believe that whiskey done the trick. Anyways, I'd ruther be drunk than dead any day—who the hell wouldn't?"

"Wonder who these fellas is?" the captain speculated. "Couple of cheechakos, prob'ly."

Black John shook his head. "They ain't cheechakos. The clothes they're wearin' are Yukon bought. My guess is that they're a couple of men who maybe made their stake an' were headin' outside. An' that some snake knew about it, an' followed 'em up here an' knocked 'em off an' robbed 'em. Anyhow, that's Downey's headache, not ours."

The captain nodded. "The Mounted does a damn good job. I shore hope Downey ketches up with whoever done it."

"Or, if he don't, I hope the damn cuss hits for Halfaday."

The captain grinned. "I hear how you boys up there don't do so bad with your miners' meetin's."

"We do the best we know how. If a man's guilty we hang him—an' if he ain't we turn him loose. There ain't no quibblin' like a judge turnin' him loose because his name was spelt wrong in in indictment, or the crown prosecutor makin' a grammatical error in summin' up his case, or an appeal court turnin' him loose because some juror was held to be prejudiced. All we want to know—did he do it or didn't he? I shore hope this bird pulls through. He might be able to identify the cuss that shot him." Black John paused and glanced at the two packsacks he had carried aboard. "If they were packin' out any dust they've been robbed, all right. There's their packs, an' neither one of 'em's heavy enough to have much gold in it."

"They might have traded in their gold for bills at the bank," the captain suggested. "Maybe we better run through their stuff—jest in case one of the crew might slip in here an' do a little sneak-thievin'."

Nothing of value was found in the packs, and the big man frowned. "They've been

robbed all right. Either that, or they didn't have anything when they started out—an' if that was the case, no one would have shot 'em. Whoever done it knew they were well heeled, or he'd never risked his neck to rob 'em."

AS THE *Racket* docked at Dawson, the wounded man was rushed to the hospital, and Black John proceeded to detachment headquarters of the Mounted Police, where he turned over the two packsacks belonging to the victims to Corporal Downey. "It's murder, all right, an' a damn dirty one," he said. "Bettles an' Swiftwater Bill was at the landin' when the *Racket* pulled in an' they identified the two as the Bronson brothers who sold out on Squaw Crick an' headed upriver a few days back with twelve hundred an' sixty ounces of dust, claimin' they was goin' back to North Dakota an' open a store. Accordin' to Bettles, they sort of spread around a couple of days before hittin' out, so the chances are some damn cuss followed 'em upriver, an' knocked 'em off an' robbed 'em. Cap Blakely an' I went through their packs there, an' there wasn't a damn ounce in either one of 'em."

Downey nodded. "Yeah, I remember seein' the Bronsons in the Klondike Palace a few nights back. They was feelin' pretty good, swingin' the girls high, wide an' han'some. Prob'ly done too much talkin' for their own good. When you headin' back upriver?"

"As soon as I get through at the recorder's. I was comin' down to record a couple of locations when I run onto their camp. I flagged down the *Racket* an' me an' Cap bandaged Sam up an' got some whiskey down him. We fetched Joe's body down, too."

Corporal Downey reached for the phone and called the hospital. After a few moments of conversation he hung up the receiver. "Doc Sutherland says he dug a .38 bullet out from under Sam's shoulder blade. Gives him a fifty-fifty chance of pullin' through. He dug another .38 out of Joe's head—revolver bullets, soft lead, no jackets. Get along to the recorder's, an' I'll be ready. I'm goin' up an' have a look-see. Prob'ly won't do no good. But you never can tell. I'll have Peters an' Blake keep an eye open around here—see if any of them damn cusses that hangs out around the Palace is throwin' around too much dust. Or it might be that one of 'em's missin'. Meanwhile, if any suspicious-lookin' stranger shows up on Halfaday, you slip me the word, an' I'll come up an' get him."

The big man grinned. "So you can take him down to Dawson an' give some jury a chance to turn him loose because his hair was parted on the wrong side, eh? I'll promise to let you know all right if the murderin' skunk shows up on Halfaday—an' if you want him when we get through with him, you're welcome. Miners' meetin's have kept Halfaday Crick a damn sight moraler than the law court has kept Dawson."

"If we bring 'em in, it ain't our fault if the court turn 'em loose."

"Shore it ain't," Black John agreed. "But the fact is the guy is apt to be turned loose to commit another murder. Up on Halfaday the evidence is heard, an' if he's guilty he's hung right then an' there. If he ain't, he's turned loose. Them boys in our graveyard layin' there with an H carved on their slab don't never repeat."

NOTHING of importance was found at the camp, and Black John took leave of Downey and headed up the White. On the evening of the second day he rounded a bend several miles above the mouth of Ladue Creek to find a canoe drawn up on the gravel, and a man seated beside a tiny fire above which a tea pail was suspended. Beaching his canoe beside the other, he stepped ashore to be greeted by a long faced, sad-eyed bewhiskered individual. "Ah, brother, welcome to my little camp. I was

about to prepare my evening meal. I trust you will join me."

"Might's well. We can go halves on the grub. I was about to camp, myself. Where you headin'?"

"I am heading for Halfaday Crick where, I am told, a band of outlaws hold forth at a place called Cushing's Fort. I left the Yukon several days ago. I was told that Halfaday Crick runs into the White River from the north. So, upon reaching the White I headed up the first crick I came to, and two days later I met an Indian who told me that I was on Ladue Crick—that Halfaday is many miles farther on."

Black John nodded. "Yeah. You an outlaw?"

"No! No! I am a minister of the gospel, the Reverend Ishmael Saunders. And like my namesake, the Ishmael of old, I wander through the wilderness seeking to do what good I can, and to carry the Word to such benighted souls as are in danger of hell-fire."

"Figure on convertin' some of the boys, eh?"

"If I can snatch one brand from the burning I will have done a worthy deed. And who knows—I may be the means of turning many from the error of their ways—even the notorious Black John Smith, himself, who I understand is king of these outlaws."

The big man nodded. "Yeah, you might, at that. You're welcome to try. But I'll give you fair warnin'—us brands snatch hard. A man might get his fingers burnt in the snatchin'. You see, I'm Black John Smith."

"Then you have no objection to my sojourning among you?"

"None whatever. Fact is there's undoubtless a few characters along the crick that a little religion wouldn't hurt none. You don't look like no priest. Methodist? Or maybe a Baptist, eh?"

"I belong to no sect. No pope, nor bishop, nor moderator can tell me what to do, or where to go, or what to say. I simply preach the Word as it stands in the Book."

"Like to be your own boss, eh? That's a good way. So do I."

As he spoke the big man removed a light pack from his canoe as the other lifted a heavy packsack aside and indicated a spot beside the fire.

"Sit down there, Brother Smith, and we'll soon have supper ready," he invited as he removed a chunk of bacon from his pack.

"Never mind the bacon, Parson," Black John said. "I just come up from Dawson an' I fetched along a couple of big thick beefsteaks. We'll throw one of them in the pan. Man gets kind of tired of bacon an' moosemeat, so when I hit Dawson I generally fill up on beef. I like mine fried damn near raw. How about you?"

"That suits me fine. While you fry the steak I'll boil the tea and warm up a can of beans."

The meal over, Black John filled his pipe, and tendered his tobacco pouch to the other, who accepted it and produced his own pipe, with the remark that he saw no harm in smoking inasmuch as there was nothing against it in the Book.

The big man grinned. "Sir Walter Raleigh hadn't discovered tobacco yet when the Book was wrote, or it would be in there, all right."

"Ain't it the truth?"

Black John glanced at the other, who was lighting a twig in the fire. "How's that?"

The man held the burning twig to his pipe and puffed vigorously. "I say the truth is set down in the Book, and if it dosen't prohibit using tobacco there can't be any harm in it. Likewise I don't see any harm in taking a drink, now and then. St. Paul himself says to take a little wine for thy stomach's sake, so if a man can't get hold of any wine, he'd have to make hard liquor do. A man shouldn't get drunk, though. The Book holds that drunkenness is a sin."

The big man nodded. "Guess you'll get

along on Halfaday all right, Parson. The boys'll appreciate your liberal-mindedness regardin' smokin' an' takin' an occasional drink."

"How about accommodations on Halfaday Crick? Could I find a cabin to live in? And maybe a building large enough to hold meetings in?"

"Oh, shore. You can move into One Eyed John's cabin. An' you won't need to worry none about a place to hold meetings. I'll speak to Cush an' he'll let you use the saloon. There's no other buildin' on the crick that would do. It's what you might call our community center. We do our drinkin' an' stud playin' there, an' likewise hold an occasional miners' meetin'."

"Miners' meeting! Then you already have a preacher on the crick?"

"No. A miners' meetin' ain't a religious gatherin'. It's more like a court of law. If someone commits murder, robbery or any other form of skullduggery, we call a miners' meetin' an' try him. If he's guilty we hang him. If he ain't, we turn him loose."

After a moment of silence the other asked, "These crimes you try a man for are all committed on the crick, I suppose."

"Oh, shore—on the crick an' the adjacent an' subtendin' territory."

"You spoke of my moving into One Eyed John's cabin. Does this One Eyed John still live there?"

"Not since we hung him, he don't."

"Why did you hang him?"

"Oh, damn if I remember. It was a while back. I think it was for murder an' robbery. But I ain't shore."

"Are you sure that this Cush, as you call him, won't object to my holding religious meetings in his saloon?"

"No, he won't object. He won't sell no drinks while you're preachin', neither. Go right ahead, long as you get the meetin's over with in time for the stud game to get goin'. If I was you I'd go kind of light on preachin' agin stud. The boys sort of favor it on Halfaday. It's about the only recreation we've got."

"Many regular preachers hold forth against gambling, but I have never found anything in the Book that says gambling is a sin. I enjoy a good game of stud myself."

Black John nodded. "Like I said, Parson, I believe you'll get along all right on Halfaday—as long as you remain amongst us."

ONE morning, some two weeks after his arrival on Halfaday accompanied by the Reverend Ishmael Saunders, Black John stepped into Cushing's saloon as Cush set out bottle, glasses and dice box.

After winning a round of drinks, he eyed the big man across the bar. "This here reverend you fetched in—cripes, we didn't need no preacher here on Halfaday! You know damn well even Downey claims we're the moralest crick in the Yukon, a'ready. It's miners' meetin's keeps us moral—not no preacher. What I claim is, one good hangin', where the boys kin see some damn skulldug kickin' around on the end of a rope, will keep a crick moraler'n a dozen preachers."

The big man filled his glass from the bottle Cush shoved toward him. "You got me wrong, Cush," he said. "I didn't fetch him in. He was headed for Halfaday of his own accord. I overtook him on the White an' we came on in together. He claimed he'd heard about the gang of outlaws that hung out here, an' he figured on comin' up an snatchin' some of us sin-blistered souls from the grip of hell. What with my pa bein' a preacher back home, I figured a little religion wouldn't hurt the boys none, so I didn't try to keep him away."

"Well, jest between you an' me, I don't believe he's no more of a preacher'n what *I* be. He plays a damn good game of stud. An' he takes a drink whenever he feels like it. Claims the Bible says a little wine is good fer the stomach ache, an' bein' as he can't git no wine here he drinks likker. His stomach must ail him somethin' fierce the

way he pours it down. He shore takes plenty o' medicine."

"But you've got to admit that he holds his liquor well. An' as for stud—did you ever see anything in the Book against stud playin'?"

"No, but I ain't got only as fer as the Axe of the 'Postles in that there Bible my fourth wife had. I got quite a bit more to read yet. Prob'ly stud playin' comes in there."

"He's held two meetin's since he's been here, an' the boys seemed to enjoy 'em."

"Yeah, but I take notice he was damn careful not to step on no one's toes. The first time he preached agin strumpets an' the like of that, an' he know'd damn well there ain't no strumpets on the crick—nor no other woman. An' the next time he preached agin makin' gravy images an' fallin' down an' worshipin' 'em. An' I'm bettin' two to one, they ain't a man on the crick, outside of you, would know what a gravy image is, let alone how to make one, or fall down an' worship it," Cush frowned. "I figure this here reverend is a damn fake, an' all the big words you kin think up ain't a-goin' to change him."

After another round of drinks, Black John eyed the safe. "Better make up a pack of dust an' I'll take it down to the bank," he said. "The clean-up's about over, an' I see the safe's kind of bulgin' at the seams."

"That's a good idee, John. Quite a few of the boys ain't fetched in their dust yet an' the safe's damn near full. Better take down about three thousan' ounces. I'll do it up whilst you throw yer stuff in yer pack."

Half an hour later, with nearly two hundred pounds of gold in his packsack, Black John turned from the bar and headed for the door. "Good luck, John," Cush called after him. "If you can't find no more preachers to fetch back, mebbe you could git holt of a good horse doctor. We shore need one here on the crick—bein' as there ain't a horse within a thousan' miles of us."

ARRIVING in Dawson, Black John proceeded directly to the bank where he exchanged the gold for bills of large denomination, and after a drink or two at the Tivoli, sauntered over to detachment headquarters to be greeted by Corporal Downey.

"Back again, eh?" Downey said. "How's everything on Halfaday? Any newcomers on the crick?"

"Everything's okay. Business as usual, as the fella says. The boys have just about finished their clean-up. Most of 'em done pretty good. Speakin' of newcomers—did you have anyone in particular in mind?"

"Well, I was hopin' that the bird who shot up the Bronson boys an' made off with their dust might have hit for Halfaday."

"Our hopes runs similar on that score. You ain't had any luck on that case, eh?"

Downey shook his head. "Not much of any. We've got one suspect in mind. But that's about all it amounts to."

"How about Sam Bronson? When I left here about six weeks ago Doc Sutherland give him an even chance to pull through."

"Sam pulled through, all right. He's good as ever. Figures on workin' a lay for Bettles over on Shorty Crick."

"You've talked with him, I s'pose. Does he think he could identify the cuss that shot him, if he saw him again?"

"He knows damn well he could. Sam got a good look at him when he shot Joe. That's howcome we've got this suspect in mind. Sam described him as near as he can remember. Of course, a man's got to take that kind of a dscription with a dose of salts—he only saw him once, an' then only for a few seconds, an' under the excitement of seein' his brother shot an' gettin' shot himself. Sam says he was a tall, sort of sad-faced-lookin' character, wearin' a beard."

Black John grinned. "Cripes, that description might fit me! I wear a beard, an' I'm tall—an' I'll bet I'd look sad as hell if I was to sneak up an' shoot a couple of fellas in cold blood."

Downey returned the grin. "I guess we

can give you a clean bill of health on a job of that kind, John. Leastwise, you ain't the character I've got in mind."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. Who do you figure done it?"

Downey cleared his throat. "You remember a while back when they called a halt on Soapy Smith's outfit, back in Skagway. After Frank Reid shot Soapy the vigilance committee took over an' scattered Soapy's gang all over hell. There was Old Man Tripp, George Wilder, Slim Jim Foster, Yeah Mow Hopkins, an' others, includin' the Reverend Bowers. We got descriptions of all of 'em, so after Sam Bronson described the man that shot him an' Joe, I put in a day or so, checkin' over the files of men wanted, an' men to watch. This Reverend Bowers come nearest to fittin' Sam's description, so I checked up on him." Downey paused and reaching into a drawer, drew out a sheet of paper. "This Bowers was one of Soapy's steerers who claimed to be a preacher—an' looked like one. Here's what we've got on him since he was chased out of Skagway. A year ago he showed up in Rampart, an' George Bribrilters, the U. S. marshal, told him to move on. Jack McQuesten an' Bob Steele claim he hung around Circle City for a while, an' later Bergman says he hung around Fortymile, snipin' the bars along the crick. Then, a couple of months ago, Bill Tanner, one of Cuter Malone's bartenders, slipped me word that Bowers was hangin' around the Klondike Palace. Tanner used to tend bar in Skagway, an' he knew Bowers. So the other day I got in touch with him an' he says Bowers hung around the Palace for a couple of weeks an' then disappeared. That would be just about the time the Bronson job was pulled off.

"I told Tanner about seein' the Bronson's spreein' around in the Palace just before they pulled out upriver, hopin' to get a line on the exact time of Bowers' disappearance, but he says he didn't know the Bronsons, an' there's so many guys whoopin' it up in there nights that he don't remember 'em."

"Preacher, eh?" Black John said, as Downey returned the sheet to the drawer. "Prob'ly resorted to murder an' robbery just as a sideline to sort of eke out his salary."

Downey grinned. "Anyway, you know as much about it as I do. So if anyone shows up on Halfaday that would fit that description, especially if he claims to be a preacher, you slip me the word, an' I'll be up there pronto."

"If he shows up, I'll slip you the word. An' like I told you before, if you want him after we get through with him, you can have him. Guess I'll hunt up Sam Bronson an' have a word with him. Might be he can remember somethin' he overlooked when he was talkin' to you. You say he's over on Shorty Crick workin' a lay for Bettles?"

"Bettles offered him a proposition. I don't know if he took him up or not. You might ask Belinda Mulrooney. He was puttin' up at the Fairview Hotel."

STOPPING in at the Tivoli, Black John was greeted by Gordon Bettles, who stood at the bar with a younger man. "Hey, come over here an' meet a friend of yourn. You'll remember him, but he won't know you—never havin' had no formal introduction." He paused and turned to the other. "Sam, this is Black John Smith, the man that fetched you downriver."

Bronson thrust out his hand. "I'm mighty glad to meet you, John. I've heard a lot about you from Downey and Doc Sutherland and the sourdoughs. And on top of that, I owe you my life."

The big man grinned. "Oh, I guess you can thank Doc Sutherland for that. I wouldn't have given a hell of a lot for your life the last time I saw you."

"He did his part, all right. But if it hadn't been for you, he'd never got to work on me. I'd have died up there on the river."

"All right—me an' Doc'll divide you up, fifty-fifty, then." The big man paused and filled the glass the bartender slid toward him. "I just been over talkin' to Downey. He claims you got a good look at the bird that shot you."

"You bet I did! I'll never forget that face! I'd know him if I saw him in hell!"

"You ondoubtless will—if you're headed that way. But how'd you like to get a look at him before that?"

"What do you mean?" the other asked eagerly.

"Meanin' that maybe you an' me had better take a little trip."

"A trip? Where to?"

"Oh, back off the river a ways—Halfaday Crick, to be exact."

After a moment's hesitation Bronson replied. "Bettles and I were about to hit out for Shorty Crick. The fact is, I'm flat broke. That twelve hundred and six ounces the robber made off with was every cent Joe and I had in the world. So when Bettles offered me a proposition on Shorty Crick, I took him up on it. And the sooner I get to work, the better."

Bettles grinned. "This here little side trip John mentioned might not be a bad idea. I'd take him up on it, if I was you. About that Shorty Crick lay—I'll hold it open for you. But I've got a hunch that when you get back from Halfaday you won't be wantin' it."

Bronson smiled and shrugged. "I don't know what it's all about. But if that's the way you fellows feel about it, I'll play along with you. When do we start?"

"About three drinks from now," Black John replied. "The *Delta's* due to pull out upriver in an hour. Cap Freely'll nose her in at the mouth of the White an' save us eighty miles of upriver paddlin'."

ARRIVING at Halfaday some ten days later, Black John slipped Bronson into his own cabin and sauntered over to the saloon. Cush counted the roll of bills the big man tossed onto the bar, placed them in the safe, and made the proper entry in his book. "Looks like you got back in a hell of a hurry," he said, as he set out bottle and glasses. "What's the matter? Weren't there no stud players in town?"

"Oh, shore, there was plenty of stud players," Black John replied as he filled his glass. "But I remembered you wanted me to fetch back a horse doctor, so when I couldn't find none I got so damn disgusted I just turned around an' headed right back here."

Cush filled his own glass and glanced at the big man over the rims of his spectacles. "Speakin' of horse doctors, you know that there reverend you fetched in—by God, I got him all wrong! You rec'lect I figgered him fer a fake. Well, he ain't. He's all right. I ketched him a time or two sort of eyein' the safe there, like—well like a man might if he figgered on bustin' into it. So, knowin' we didn't want no sech a damn cuss on the crick, I got holt of Red John an' Pot Gutted John, an' told 'em to git the reverend off to one side an' cook up a scheme fer robbin' the safe. I figgered to wait till you come back, then have the three of 'em go ahead an' start in on the safe some night, an' we'd be layin' fer 'em an' ketch 'em at it. Then we'd hold a miners' meetin' an' vote a hangin' onto 'em. We'd hang the reverend first, so he wouldn't never know we turned Red John an' Pot Gut loose."

Black John nodded. "Not a bad idea, at that. A trifle onethical, maybe—but not bad. When's the play comin' off?"

"It ain't. Like I told you, I got the reverend wrong. Not only he wouldn't have nothin' to do with the deal, but he up an' give Pot Gut an' Red John hell fer figgerin' it out. Then, on top of that, come Sunday, when we was havin' church in here, he r'ared up an' preached the damndest sermon you ever heard agin' robbery an' murder an' such like. An', believe me, he kin preach

(Continued on page 111)

Dan felt a smashing impact in his head. . . .

STEEL

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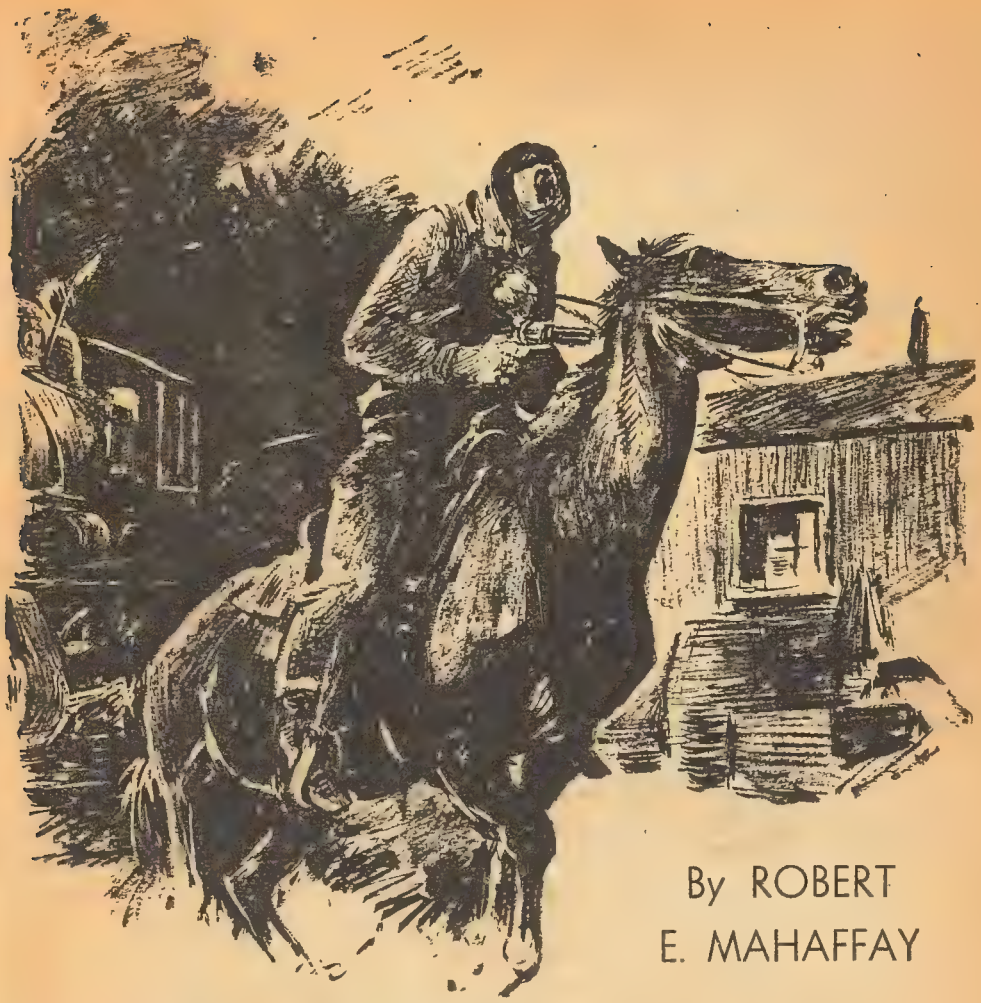
CHAPTER ONE

Sins of the Fathers

BEHIND old Cass Harper, as he stumbled along the rain-soaked ties, lay twisted destruction and death. Lightning seared a gigantic scar along the black flank of the sky, and the sky roared its agony. The devils of violence had swarmed out of hell and were carousing with reckless fury among the peaks and towering mountain crags.

Kindly old Cass Harper's wrinkled face was torn with pain—pain from his broken arm and from the catastrophe he had witnessed. He must get out the torpedoes and warn the passenger train that was riding



By ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

RAIL PRISONER •

Only one man could save that range from ruin—Dan Shane, who lay in jail awaiting the hangnoose that would cut short a man's life—and a country's hope. . . .

on Number Four's tail. Number Four, a twisted mass of steel and wood and iron, lay piled up on Blindman's Curve.

The rain slashed at the old brakeman's face and body. Ringing in his ears was the inhuman screeching of the storm devils, the tortured bellowing of dying steers in the telescoped cattle cars. His engineer and his conductor were dead. Dead—and their death had been murder!

A new sound sliced through that enormous din of destruction and fury—a scream, high-pitched, endless. Whipped to thinness by the wind, a voice was crying

out, "Dad! Dad! Dad!" Crying out that single word with a terrible, hopeless persistence.

Lightning ripped across the black sky again, hung there, quivering. By its sharp white light Cass Harper saw the figure of a man sprawled motionless on his back between the rails, the right side of his face and head bloody. Over him crouched a thin boy.

Cass Harper recognized the man—Big Dave Shane. Anger, which was a rare thing with the brakeman, burst up through the horror that had been gripping him.

Vividly his mind pictured again the flash of the exploding dynamite that had turned Blindman's Curve into a shambles and wrecked Number Four. There could be no doubt now as to who had set off that deadly charge. Everybody knew Big Dave Shane—and everybody knew the reason he had to hate the railroad.

Cass Harper had no time to stop and see if Shane were dead. Those warning torpedoes had to be set. Head down against the lash of the wind and rain, his broken arm dangling helplessly, he forged past the sprawled man and the boy.

"Got him!" he muttered. "The blast Big Dave set off got him, too!"

A FEW weeks later, Danny Shane sat hunched by the side of his father in the Shadow Rock courtroom. He was a tow-headed, spindly kid, thirteen. He felt queer and choked inside; his lips were closed tight, like his father's, though it seemed that the need of sobbing must break them apart. He could look up and see the gaunt, stern line of his father's profile, and the raw red welt on his forehead where the rock flung by the exploding dynamite had struck him.

Danny Shane knew that behind him were the jammed spectators, but he did not look at them. Nor did he look at the thin, horse-faced judge who coughed continually; nor at the twelve men hitching uncomfortably in chairs in one corner of the room.

All of the things they were talking about, Danny Shane knew. Only they weren't telling the right of it. He knew because he had lived through it, with Big Dave explaining each move in the game to him.

It was more than a year now since the steel bands of the railroad had come reaching treacherously for Shadow Rock, attempting to buy up land for nothing. Unwilling to risk a fight, and acknowledging the ultimate good, most of the Shadow Rock cattlemen had taken their loss, though grudgingly.

Not so Big Dave Shane. He had been the first man into the Shadow Rock country. He had fought for this land, bought it with sweat and blood. The railroad proposed to cut the heart out of it for a pittance. Big Dave Shane had asked a fair price for what was hard won—that was all. Fearful that other ranchers would rally to his point of view, the railroad had set out to smash him. Big Dave Shane had fought back hopelessly. There had been a welter of trumped-up lawsuits, trouble over the mortgage, old debts brought up. The bank, run by shrewd Price Ogden, had backed the big dog.

Danny Shane remembered how the foundations had been whittled from under the mighty Double D. How riders had been let go. How the beef had been sold, and then the she-stock. How there had been only he and his father—with Big Dave Shane grown gaunt, hard, silent. Those had been evil days. He had seen his father battered and torn, like a great pine in a vicious storm. They had whipped Big Dave Shane, mercilessly. . . .

Big Dave Shane wouldn't talk when they put him on the stand. With a terrible bitterness he said only, "You broke me and my ranch. Now you've framed me. There's nothing I can prove. Go ahead and finish it up."

Danny Shane, when questioned, sobbed

out the story of that fateful night. He and his father had been alone at the ranch house. After dark a man had ridden up. No, he didn't know who the man was. Big Dave and the man had talked together outside. Then Big Dave had come inside and said, "Looks like things are turning our way at last, kid. I got to go to a meeting. I'll be back, maybe, with good news."

He had ridden off into the storm. Danny had followed him then because—well, because the wind was making such a gosh-awful noise and he was the least little bit afraid. He had seen the explosion, heard the wreck of Number Four. Lightning had shown him the body of his father. But Big Dave hadn't done it, Danny knew. He hadn't done it!

But the storm had wiped out all sign. There were a half dozen men towards whom suspicion might have been pointed—half-crazed Lem Totten, on whom dynamite had once been found, or surly Wold Brand who, only a few weeks before, had made threats against the road. Yet the jury after only scant deliberation convicted Big Dave Shane of wrecking Number Four by dynamiting the railroad tracks on Blindman's Curve.

Sheriff Lon Hilyard was leading Danny out of the courtroom when shy old Cass Harper stopped him, cap in hand. "What happens to the boy, Lon?"

"Reform school, I reckon, Cass."

"I'd kind of like to take him, Lon, 'stead of that. It was me found him there at the wreck. I've told Mom about it, calling to his daddy in a way I won't forget, thinking he was dead. We—we'd both like to have him."

"That'll be simple enough, if you want him. Only you're takin' a chance on bad blood, Cass."

So Danny Shane went to live in Cass Harper's little cottage with the picket fence. Big Dave Shane went to the penitentiary at Deer Lodge, and six months later he died there. . . .

THERE was no bad blood in Danny Shane. He hated the railroad at first, with the piercing hatred of a boy toward the thing that has torn away from him what he values most. That was inevitable. Years might dull that bleak, aching emptiness in him, but they would never blot out the painful sores etched in his mind, or the memory of Big Dave Shane.

On the night they had taken Big Dave away, Danny had knelt by his bed and prayed through tears that he might find a way to force them to bring his father back. Then Big Dave had died, but the consuming determination to prove him innocent remained. It was a flame in Danny Shane, hot and unquenchable.

In time the Harper cabin became home to him. That part of his boyishness that demanded affection struck roots. Kindly old Cass did what he could. He was a short man, little pudgy and half bald. The railroad was his life, though he was a brakeman and would never be anything else. He had a daughter, Rachel, but no son. Gradually the slim, solemn-faced, gray-eyed boy came to fill that place in his heart. So, too, with Mrs. Harper who was large-bosomed, friendly and wrinkled about the eyes.

As the years dropped behind him, a new flame grew in Danny Shane beside the first. Part of it Cass Harper instilled in him, part of it came naturally to him. Though he fought it at first, the railroad held a dazzling fascination for him.

He would walk with Cass to work at night. The railroad yards stirred him with a thrill he could not shake off. He never tired of the sight—the dark mass of the warehouse sheds, the yellow windows of the roundhouse, the blinding globes of the engine headlights, charging madly back and forth in the night, coating steel rails with a silver sheen.

And all of it was brought to throbbing life by the sounds—the grinding rumble of wheels, the straining creak of wooden

coaches, locomotives panting in mighty gusts, steam ferociously hissing as it clouded, white and threatening, into the headlight glare.

Danny Shane's blanket anger against the road diminished. By the time he was eighteen the thrill of this new means of transportation was in him to stay. Behind the might of the panting monsters he saw the need that had brought them into existence. He saw the benefits brought to the country the road was opening up.

The operation of the road, however, interested him not so much as the building of it. He had developed early a flair for mathematics and he speculated now on the problems of running twin strips of steel through some rugged hill country.

"You'll make a railroader," Case promised with glowing pleasure. "Something more than just a brakeman."

So old Cass Harper scraped and pinched that Danny Shane might go to college. He was to have his chance. Engineering—that was what he was to study. He would build railroads one day—bigger roads than this little tinhorn setup.

Danny got three years of college—with construction work in the summer—before hard times hit the country in general. Everything tightened, then. Old Cass Harper was laid off. Never financially strong, the railroad was dangerously close to bankruptcy. More than one rancher who had bought stock, in addition to donating land, was hard hit. Cattle prices were dropping. Shipping costs became prohibitive.

Dan Shane came back to that. Striving for a brightness he could not muster, Cass explained what was happening. The road would go, it looked like. And the Shadow Rock country, which had banked its future on the road, would be ruined too.

The road was not the only thing Dan found changed. Ray Harper was no longer the pigtailed girl with wide brown eyes. She was twenty now, two years younger than he, a slim young woman with a certain quiet beauty that was accentuated by the shyness she had inherited from her father.

It was a shock that Dan discovered Darrel Ogden, son of the banker, Price Ogden, visiting the Harper cottage regularly, exhibiting an air of proprietorship.

Darrel Ogden had remained in Shadow Rock. His father's influence had brought him the post of assistant superintendent with the road. Shrewdly Dan guessed that Cass Harper's dismissal had been for the purpose of bringing pressure to bear on the girl.

DAN SHANE had been home a week when Price Ogden sent for him. Both the Ogdens were in the inner office of the bank when Dane Shane got there. Darrel Ogden—sleek and dapper, with greenish eyes that never rested fully on anything and a scornful twist to his thin lips. Price Ogden—so pulpy and huge of body that he seemed about to spill over the arms of his oak chair. He had a stiff brush of white hair that would have made him distinguished had not the sagging jowls and the piercing, fat-recessed eyes given an impression of ruthlessness. What lay beneath the surface of Price Ogden no man knew, though many swore, between curses, that they did.

Six feet two inches now, filled out to one hundred and eighty pounds, Dan Shane faced them across the desk. His blunt-jawed face was more serious than it should have been, his gray eyes were steady and sure.

Without lifting his gaze from his folded hands, Price Ogden rumbled, "You're an engineer, are you, Shane?"

Without waiting for an answer, he snapped, "You haven't forgotten what the railroad did to your father, I hope?"

"I'll never forget that."

"Still got the fool-kid notion that Dave didn't wreck that freight?"

"He didn't. I'll prove it some day."

Price Ogden raised expressionless eyes; there was too much fat on his face for it to reveal much. "Rubbish. You're wasting your time. I've got a job, though, that might help you pay off for your father."

"I don't need help for that," said Dan Shane softly.

Ogden shrugged. "Whoever surveyed this line botched it. It was a cheap job, remember, from start to finish. They tried to cut corners on their engineering, and they got stung. This road isn't making money, and it can't make money. I want a report from you proving that." He hesitated, studying Dan Shane carefully. "The right type of report might be used to throw this road into bankruptcy. Big Dave, in that case, would be paid in full, with interest." Ogden reached casually for a drawer "There would be money in it, Shane. Big money."

The meaning behind the banker's words hit Dan Shane slowly. On that report hinged the future of the Shadow Rock cattle country. If the road went broke, the ranchers who had taken stock in it, who had banked on it, would be cleaned out. It would be what Price Ogden hinted—revenge, vicious and complete, for the ruin and death of Big Dave Shane.

Dan Shane took a deep breath. "Keep the money," he said grimly, "until I've made my report."

CHAPTER TWO

Steel Rails to Hell!

IT WAS two weeks later. Dane Shane had spent those two weeks tramping through the hills with his instruments, drawing plans. He stood now, straight and grim, in the office of Price Ogden. He had found what the banker sent him to find—and something else.

Dull red anger flushed into the face of Price Ogden as his head came up from the sheaf of papers he was studying. Anger crinkled the flesh about his deep-set eyes. With fat hands shaking from rage he wrenched the paper in two, tore them again and again.

"Damn you, Shane! You double-crossed me!"

"Why smash the road," asked Dan Shane, "when there's a chance to save it?"

Price Ogden jerked his head, snarled, "It can't be saved. Your plan is wild." He swept the torn remnants of the papers off the desk top with a wrathful movement of his pudgy hand. "I didn't offer to pay you for this! You damned fool!"

Fire was smoldering in Dan Shane's gray eyes. "You asked for a report, Ogden. You got it. This road can be pulled out of the hole it's in. You're right in one thing. The surveying was a botched job. As it stands now, the road runs thirty miles to the south through the Table Buttes—it's a long haul and a tough one. Most of the freights have to be double-headed on account of the grades, the slide repairs have cost three times what the road cost in the first place.

"I've run a survey to the north—by bridging Roaring Gorge — that will cut operating expenses in half. Good country will be tapped instead of the Table Buttes badlands. Freight rates will go down. If that bridge goes in, the road can show a profit and loss setup that anybody will lend money on, hard times or not."

"Kid," the banker sneered, "where are your brains? You're tossing away a thousand dollars. And maybe more on top of that. You're crossing your dad who hated this road and did the best he could to break it. This bridge of yours will never go through!"

Dan Shane leaned forward on the desk. The knuckles of the hands that propped him up were white.

"It *will* go through, Ogden. It's on account of my dad that I'll see to it. I reckon he'd want me to. Somebody sent him to prison, and killed him by doing it. Some-

body gave him as black a name as a man can get. Now this road and this country are going to hell. If a Shane can pull them out, it will go a long way toward cleaning a name."

"Nobody'll ever clean Big Dave's name. He got what was coming to him. Folks don't forget that easy."

Dan Shane spoke slowly. "I don't want them to forget. There's something else, Ogden, that I haven't forgot. The part of the Double D that the railroad didn't want, you got! If that means a warning to you, take it that way!"

Price Ogden pulled himself ponderously and slowly to his feet. "Not hinting, are you, kid, that I framed Big Dave?"

"Somebody did," said Dan Shane. "Before I'm through, I'll find out who it was."

There had been copies of the plans Price Ogden had torn up. Dan Shane took them to the directors of the road, fought for the rerouting he believed in. The issue was clear enough. As it stood, the road was doomed. But money, for the present, could come from only one source—the Shadow Rock cattlemen.

Dan Shane argued, pleaded, swore. The cattlemen were in too deep to retreat—it was a matter of risking everything in a last-ditch effort to stave off ruin.

The money came, drained out of a cattle country already bled white. The ranchers and railroaders of Shadow Rock waited grimly to see what Dan Shane could do.

It was Price Ogden who swung the deal, in the end. He came himself to the Harper cottage, and with old Cass and Mrs. Harper listening, said bluntly, "I made a mistake, Shane. I misjudged you and what you're trying to do. I'm willing to throw my influence behind you, for whatever it's worth."

WHEN he had gone, Cass Harper shook his head wonderingly. "There goes a queer man, Danny. You didn't know him when he first came here. He was young, making his way—as promising a youngster as ever hit this county. Everybody liked him. He had bad luck when he married; brought a girl out from the East. Funny, the women some men pick out to fall in love with. This one was a she-devil. Price loved her, though. He would have cut off his right hand with a knife if she'd asked him to. She treated him like a dog, kept hounding him for more money than an honest two-bit banker can make.

"Right after Big Dave went to prison, something happened to Price. Nobody knows just what, but they say he was like a wild man—wouldn't leave the house, didn't let anyone in. Then his wife ran off with a mining man from the Coast. It was money she wanted, and he hadn't been able to give it to her. When Price Ogden came out of that house, he was a different man. Hard on his friends and hard on his enemies.

"He's made the money he couldn't make before. He's touched no man's hand in nine years, and no man has touched his. They claim he hates that scalawag son of his because he has *her* blood in him, that the boy has some of the same influence over him that she had. Coming to you like he did just now is the first decent thing he's done in nine years."

"Maybe," said Dan Shane. "But remember—if this new setup goes haywire, he'll have the whole Shadow Rock country in his vest pocket."

Dan Shane pushed work on the Roaring Gorge trestle at furious speed. Coffer dams were put in, stone piers were sunk through quicksand to bedrock, giant timbers were cut and hauled from the mountains to the west. In a race against time the lean skeleton began to crawl skyward.

There were hints of trouble before the foundations were in. It broke in earnest one night at dusk when Dan, gaunt and red-eyed from the relentless strain of supervising two shifts working from daylight till dark, was showing the job to Ray Harper.

Dan found a curious relief in talking to

her. When her brown eyes met his she seemed to understand what he, in his brusque hurry, did not have time to put into words. She had the shyness of her father, but beneath it a certain power which old Cass had never owned. Dan Shane loved her.

They had come twenty feet or more down the footpath that led from the top of the gorge. Below them, stark in the gathering dusk, rose the timbers of the trestle. Above them was the shadowed rocky lip of the gorge.

A sharp wind running down from the hills tossed wisps of dark hair about the girl's cheeks. Such a slight thing softened Dan Shane's hard concentration, washed out the lines forming between his brows.

"It means more to you than—than just a job, doesn't it?" she asked him softly.

He nodded. "There's not a slab of rock, not a timber in it that wasn't put there for Big Dave."

"He must have been a fine man, Danny, to make you do that for him."

"There never was a finer," said Dan Shane hoarsely. "Some day I'll prove it."

A flurry of shouts came abruptly from the top of the gorge. Swiftly Dan Shane turned, began to race up the steep footpath. Just visible over the rim was a roaring, crimson shaft forking up against the black sky.

Two big supply sheds were ablaze, the flames ripping savagely at the flimsy structures. Sprinting toward them, Dan saw instantly that they could not be saved.

MEN were pouring out of the low mess shack to the left. Dan shouted to them to get out the box cars behind the buildings. There was a tense anger ruling him. This had been no accident. By his own orders nothing inflammable had been placed in or near the sheds.

On the far side of the buildings from the men, a skulking figure sprang out suddenly from the shadows—a man, running crouched over fleeing from the scene of the fire.

For a moment he was clearly limned by the glare from the leaping flames; then he plunged into the encircling dimness. Dan Shane swerved to cut him off. He did so unseen, apparently, for the man was breaking at an angle toward him.

Dan stopped, poised on the balls of his feet, ears tuned for sound. Out of the dark came the hiss or air pulled into laboring lungs, the swift beat of speeding boots. A figure loomed ahead; a gun crashed as Dan lunged forward. In a flying tackle, his shoulder struck the running man's hip, bowled him over.

There was a snarled curse, a glint of firelight on a gun barrel. Dan Shane fumbled for the man's chin, found it, slugged hard with his right fist. The gun skittered away into the dark.

Dan heaved the limp frame over his shoulder. Where the fire made a circle of light he left him with a brawny Irish mucker as guard, and went on to do what he could with the fire. It was very little.

An hour later the sheds were gone, and with them a precious seventy-five hundred dollars worth of supplies. Six of the road's box cars, which had not been moved soon enough, were heaps of ash and twisted metal.

Smoke-blackened, gray eyes hard, Dan Shane stalked back to where he had left his prisoner. The man was on his feet, held in the grip of the Irish guard. Dan knew him —Sling Cable, one of the iron crew. He was middle-aged, emaciated, stoop-shouldered. A two-day beard sprouted from his hollow cheeks, and his eyes, unnaturally bright, betrayed the drug addict.

Gripped by deep anger, Dan twisted his fingers in the shirt at the man's throat, shook him till the cloth ripped away in his hand.

"Who hired you for the job?" he demanded.

Cable staggered back, strangling. "Keep

your hands off me," he snarled. "I didn't do nothing."

"Nothing but fire the sheds! Talk, damn you, or I'll beat it out of you!"

"You're crazy. I didn't torch 'em!" Cable was rubbing a hand over his hurt throat, his pale face livid with hate. "I happened to be near the sheds. Seen the man that put fire to 'em running away. I took out after him, aiming to stop him. Then you jumped up an' belted me. He's gone now, an' you lost him by messing into it!"

Dane Shane's fists were knotted. "That's a lie. Only one man broke away from the fire. You're the man. You'll smell jail for the job, but you'll talk first!"

A thin hand clutched at Dan Shane's shoulder as he started forward. He whirled, found himself staring into the thin, sneering face of Darrel Ogden.

"Hold it, Shane! Cable here is right. I saw the whole thing happen."

"So did I," said Dan, blunt jaw clamping on the word. "Cable set that fire."

Dan studied the dapper Ogden coldly Fury drained out of him, leaving set grimness.

Darrel Ogden shrugged. "It's his word and mine against yours, Shane. I can't see the deadwood hung on an innocent man. Cable might have got the firebug if you hadn't horned in and slugged him. You're responsible for his getting away, and you're trying to take it out on Cable."

"Coming out in the open, are you, Ogden?" Dan asked.

"If anybody would like to see this job wrecked," sneered Ogden, "it's not me. Big Dave tried the same thing, once before!"

Dan Shane took a single step, swung his two fists, left and right, to Darrel Ogden's insolent face. Ogden pitched down to his knees. Groping blindly, nose and mouth streaming blood, he choked, "Damn you, Shane! I'll even this!"

His face a dark mask, Dan turned to the cringing Cable. He knew he could make no charge against the man stick—Darrel Ogden would see to that.

"You," he snapped, "get off the job! Come within gunshot of it again and you'll get a beating you'll never forget!"

THE fire trick was only the first. Dan Shane placed guards at each vital spot along the new line. They were only partially successful. A rock slide, started at the top of the gorge, plunged down on the rising trestle, wiping out a week's work. A warped rail, set on a curve at night by an unknown crew, derailed a locomotive hauling timbers from the hills. Blows under the heart—when the work was being pushed frantically against time, when dwindling cash reserves made each thousand-dollar outlay mountainous.

Dan Shane dropped thirty pounds, changed into a gaunt, bearded devil with hell flaming in his gray eyes. He drove his men like a demon staving off an attack by archangels. But the bridge went up!

Dan knew that the rumor had spread that the new line would never go in. The delays, the cost, were ruinous. The road would be bankrupt before it could be finished.

From no tangible source word sifted through the Shadow Rock country that Dan Shane himself was responsible for the sabotage—it was a cunning plan to revenge his father. All the old talk about Big Dave Shane sprang up again. Dan heard it, and it rankled bitterly in him, but he could not take the time to deny or fight it. He had time only for work. In the new line, in the Roaring Gorge trestle, would lie the proof. The rumble of deadly talk he tried to ignore.

Not a day passed that Price Ogden did not come out to inspect the work. He never spoke. He gave no sign of approval or dislike. If emotion tore at him inwardly, the cold, heavy expressionless mask of his face did not reveal it.

Weeks passed. As if the two hands of

Dan Shane were lifting it, the Roaring Gorge trestle rose to level out the road. Out of hardship and Herculean effort was looming victory. The job was nearly done.

Drugged with weariness and lack of sleep, Dan Shane sat at the table in the cabin he had taken near the gorge. Beneath elbows that propped up his head were the drawings and figures for the line. He knew them by heart, but by the light of a smudged oil lamp, he traced through them again. These plans spelled long-sought achievement, success.

The knock at the door came twice before he heard it. He got up slowly, pulled open the panel. Dim light rushed past him to fall on the face of the man standing outside. It was the emaciated bright-eyed Sling Cable.

"Take it easy," Cable blurted glibly. "I got something to tell you, you'll want to hear."

Fighting against the weariness in his brain, jaw grimly set, Dan waited.

"I don't need to tell you what's been intended for this job," Cable bit out.

"No. Nobody does."

"They're goin' to wipe you out, Shane."

"Who?"

Cable's lips twisted craftily. "Telling you who wouldn't do you no good or me no good. I'll show 'em to you. They're rigging up the deal tonight."

"What in hell makes you think I'll believe that?"

Cable's tongue ran over his lips. "Don't, if you don't feel like it. Only I had a hunch you would. I want to see the sons get what's comin' to 'em. They crossed me, damn 'em. I was to get paid for—for a job I did, an' they crooked me out of it. If you want to see your damned bridge go up in smoke—stay here!"

Struggling against the leaden weariness of his mind, Dan said, "I'll go."

Cable nodded. "They got a man watching this place. I'll skin out an' meet you at the foot of the hill with a bronc."

Dan Shane turned back into the cabin. From a nail over his bunk he picked his gunbelt with its holstered .45 revolver. He whipped his mind, weighing this thing. The odds were long that a trap had been arranged for him, but there was a slim chance that the renegade Cable was not lying. Too much hinged on that slight chance—he had to grasp at it.

CHAPTER THREE

The Double-Cross

CUPPING a hand over the lamp chimney, Dan Shane blew out the light, stepped outside. The patter of hoofs came to him instantly. He flattened against the front wall of the shack, pulled the gun into his right fist. A horse and rider were faintly outlined against the night sky.

A voice came to him softly: "Danny?"

A step took Dan Shane to the pony's side. "You, Ray? What is it?"

"Dad wants to see you, Danny. Can you come? It—it has something to do with Big Dave, Danny."

"You mean," he asked her hoarsely, "about the wreck?"

"I think so. Dad wouldn't say what it was. He wanted you to come over. Can you?"

One of Dan Shane's lean hands reached up to cover hers on the saddle horn. "I will, Ray, but not right now. There's something I've got to do first. Tell Cass I'll be over as soon as I'm through with it."

He watched as she rode away, until the dark had swallowed her and the clink of her mount's hoofs were gone. Then he turned and strode down the hill. Sling Cable was waiting there with two horses.

As Cable stepped up and straightened in the saddle, Dan Shane's gun slid forward into his ribs. "Ride ahead, Cable. If you're playing this square, you won't regret it. If you aren't, you'll never see daylight."

Sling Cable protested, squirmed, then

sullenly jabbed his mount into a trot. Dan Shane followed doggedly. His nerves cried out in protest; every muscle in his body ached. He focused bloodshot, heavy-lidded eyes on Cable's back, kept them there.

Half an hour of riding brought the lights of Shadow Rock up from behind a wooded shoulder. They skirted the town, struck into the mountains. The summer night was warm and there was no wind. Dan bit his lips to avoid the drowsiness he could not shake off.

The gun barrel he tried to rest on the saddle horn kept slipping off. If he could only tilt out of the saddle and fall into the soft darkness by the horse's side! But no, he had to watch Cable. Something about the Roaring Gorge trestle—the trestle that was to vindicate Big Dave Shane.

Dan realized suddenly that they had stopped. The night was very quiet around them. Sling Cable was leaning toward him, peering at him.

"All right," Dan Shane said thickly, "what is it you've got to show me?"

Cable made no answer. Through the stillness came the shrill hoot of a locomotive whistle. Dan concentrated on it. That would be the Limited, hitting Shadow Rock at midnight. The whistle disturbed him vaguely. The Limited shouldn't be whistling here—something was wrong.

Dan stared down at the tracks. A red light was weaving there. The whistle streamed out into the night again. Steel screeched as brakes went on and wheels locked.

Furiously Dan Shane jerked his head toward Cable. "Damn you, Cable! What—"

The Limited had stopped. Shots broke out in a sudden, rising chatter. Sling Cable was moving. His right arm was flipping up.

Desperately Dan Shane tried to bring his own gun up—but it was too heavy. Like a shaft of lightning the knowledge struck home that he didn't have a chance. He saw a puff of flame at the muzzle of Sling Cable's gun, felt a blinding, smashing impact in his head, then nothing more. . . .

DAN SHANE'S head was spinning dizzily when he came to. It was still dark. Yellow lights were bobbing about him crazily. It was a minute or two before he realized they were lanterns. One of them was thrust close to his face, blinding him.

Voices penetrated to him in harsh mutters:

"Shane was one of 'em all right. Might have known there was somethin' behind the talk—blood don't lie." . . . "Three bullets gone out of his gun. He'll hang for this." . . . "I'd like to hang the rest of 'em with him. I'd swear I got at least one other—the hefty gent that was fixing to blow the express car."

Dan Shane strove to steady his spinning brain. The Limited had been stopped, held up. Apparently the effort had failed. Dan tried to think what he should do. He was too tired to think.

Someone was boosting up his shoulders. A gruff voice advised, "We better get him into Shadow Rock. This country'll go wild when they find out."

A rough bandage had been put around his head. Dan Shane felt himself being picked up, arm and leg, and carried down the gravelly incline to the roadbed. He was passed up into the engine cab of the Limited, taken into Shadow Rock. A grim cordon of railroad men hurried him from the station to the jail.

Stretched out on the narrow cot of the jail cell, Dan guessed at the reason for the hurry. That thought burned. The son of Big Dave Shane would be called traitor by the Shadow Rock country! Three shots gone from his gun, they had said. It must have been Cable who had fired them.

Shifting figures fogged Dan Shane's mind—the bright-eyed Sling Cable, stubby old Cass Harper, Ray, his stern father as he had sat in the courtroom years ago with his fists clenched between his knees.

Voices pierced that whirling fog after a

time—voices coming from the front office.

Price Ogden's rumbling tones came through heavily: "I've had enough of this. Leave him alone."

Darrel Ogden's answer stung like a whiplash: "Trying to crawl now, are you? You always were a coward when you saw money in front of you."

"I won't answer for what I'll be if this goes on. My hands are bloody with the life of one innocent man—there won't be another."

"Go home and forget it," snarled Darrel. "I'm handling this."

"Home?" asked Price Ogden bitterly. "I haven't got any."

Boards creaked as a man moved across them. A moment of silence, then Darrel Ogden's voice calling to two men. Prinz and Larry. Railroad detectives.

Light fell through the corridor as the office door opened, and three men came down to the cell. Dan Shane got shakily to his feet.

Darrel Ogden's thin, leering face pressed close to the bars. "Ready to talk, Shane?"

"I'll talk," said Dan harshly. "Find your friend, Sling Cable. Put him in here with me."

"Not good enough, Shane. Sling Cable was in Shadow Rock all evening. He's got witnesses to prove it. Come on, Shane. Who was in on the stickup with you?"

It was hopeless, and Dan knew it. "I'll do my talking in court," he said.

Darrel Ogden produced a key, opened the cell door and stepped inside. "No, you'll do it here, or you'll take a worse beating than you ever gave anybody." Sneering, he jerked his head. Prinz and Larry followed him in, and the door clanged shut.

Dan saw what was coming. Darrell Ogden wanted to get even for the hammering he had been given.

Dan backed to the wall at the far end of the cell, brought up his weary fists. He made a grotesque picture as he stood there—bloody bandage hanging loosely about his head, his eyes like burning coals, and his body gaunted by the many weeks of relentless work.

"Go get him," said Darrel Ogden. Prinz and Larry, both powerful men, came at him swiftly. Prinz hit him on the left side of the jaw. Dan's guard was no good. Before he could recover, Larry smashed a blow against his mouth. They were both on him then, slugging with both fists.

It was Dan Shane's overwhelming weariness that showed the only mercy. It saved him punishment that the grim fighting heart in him would have made him take.

The job was a cruel one, but it was swift. Two minutes after Darrel Ogden's bleak order had been given, the three men filed out of the cell, leaving Dan Shane sprawled on the floor.

CONSCIOUSNESS filtered back to him after a time. He crawled to the cot and fell into the sleep his worn body had been craving for hours.

The mellow light of late afternoon was coming through the high barred window when he awoke. His head pained him and his body ached, but the sleep had done him good. A slow anger at what had happened began to creep through him.

Outside there was a strange hum running through the town. The wrath of the Shadow Rock country was rising—directed, Dan knew, against himself, and against the memory of Big Dave Shane.

Darrel Ogden had done his work carefully.

It was nearing dusk when the door to the office opened and footsteps came hurriedly down the corridor. Then Dan Shane was clutching the bars at the front of his cell, staring into the warm brown eyes of Ray Harper and the wrinkled, harrassed face of old Cass.

"They wouldn't let us in before," Cass said angrily. "Sheriff Hilyard was away. Just got back. Danny boy, this town's gone

plumb to hell. They're—they're talking about lynch—"

"Don't," the girl cut in swiftly. "He knows all that. What was it that happened last night, Danny? When you didn't come—"

"They framed me, the way they framed Big Dave," Dan told her grimly. "I should have known better. I did, but I thought there was an outside chance of it being square, and had to play it that way. I couldn't lift a finger when they sprang the trap on me."

"Danny," old Cass burst out, "I'll do anything I can. There must be something If you'll only tell me—"

Dan stared straight ahead. Helpless old Cass, trying desperately to help, when there was nothing he could do.

"Dad," the girl said in a low voice, "tell Danny what you were going to tell him last night."

"Don't seem like it will do any good now," the old man murmured worriedly. "It was about Big Dave, Danny. I'm telling you straight, son, I always thought Big Dave dynamited that curve. But yesterday, Danny, I saw a man that made me remember something. 'Wolf,' they called him Wolf Brand. He was a bad one. He worked for the railroad, bossed a road gang. He got himself fired—they claimed he was mixed up in a station robbery but couldn't prove it—and he swore he'd get even. He dropped out of sight, though, 'bout a week before that wreck, and folks forgot about him. Now, Danny, damn it, it may not mean anything, but I saw Wolf Brand in Shadow Rock yesterday. It struck me all in a heap, thinking that maybe *him*, an' not Big Dave . . ." The old man faltered helplessly. "Only now, Danny—"

"Only now," said Dan Shane savagely, "I'm in jail with a charge of my own to get out from under." He thought for a minute, teeth drawing blood from his lips, then asked sharply, "Cass, what about the bridge? They were due to finish it today."

"It's done," Cass exclaimed eagerly. "The work train is making the first run across it at daylight tomorrow. And, Danny, I'm braking on it! Darrel Ogden put me back on! Think of it, Danny. Darrel Ogden put me to work again!"

A word from the girl cut the old man off Staring at them both, Dan Shane guessed what payment Darrel Ogden would exact for the return of Cass Harper's job.

The jailer called surlily from the office, breaking the stiff silence.

"Got to go," Cass mumbled. "I'll do what I can, Danny. I'll try everything."

"Dad," Ray Harper said steadily, "you go on. I want to say something to Danny. I'll be right out."

Old Cass Harper shuffled down the corridor. Ray Harper's soft oval face with its wide brown eyes went closer to the bars. She kissed Dan Shane.

"Whatever happens, Danny," she whispered, "remember I love you. You must get out of here, Danny. Someone is whipping up the town—they're going to break in here tonight. Here, Danny. They searched dad, but they didn't search me."

She was gone. Dan Shane looked down into his hand. There was a knife in it, a common pocket-knife with a blade no more than three inches long. It pointed the way to a life of exile, a hunted life as a self-confessed outlaw. Ray Harper had given it to him, but she had promised that she loved him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Out of the Past

IT WAS dark in the cell. Dan had got dinner eventually by shouting for it. He looked down at the tin plate, its contents stirred up but uneaten, and weighed the open jack-knife in his right hand. He knelt down and slid the plate half under the bars of the door.

Then, body tense in the darkness, he

straightened and called out, "Jailer! Jailer!"

It took some time to get a response. At last the office door swung open and the jailer demanded, "What in hell's the matter now?"

"It's this grub. The damned stuff is spoiled."

"You ain't payin' for it. Go ahead an' eat it anyhow."

"By God, I can't," Dan snapped. "I took one mouthful and it gave me the cramps. It's poisoned me, I tell you. Get a doctor or it'll kill me."

The jailer advanced down the corridor suspiciously. He was a wiry, hard-faced man with a broken nose. He had been drinking, evidently, for his walk was unsteady. He guided himself along the far side of the corridor with his right hand.

"You ain't poisoned," he growled. "I got your grub same place I got my own, over to the Chink's."

"Yours didn't come out of the same can mine did, then. It's that damned salmon. If a doc doesn't get it out of my guts it'll kill me. Smell it yourself."

Still grumbling suspiciously, the jailer knelt down to pick up the plate. Dan Shane's left hand shot through the bars, gripped him by the back of the neck. The point of the knife blade went against his throat.

"Don't move, mister, or I'll ram this knife through your spine!"

"Don't," the jailer choked. "For God's sake, Shane, don't!"

"Take your keys out, easy. Make it slow and careful. Unlock the door."

The key rasped in the lock. Dan lifted out the fellow's gun, cocked it and held it trained as he motioned the man into the cell. Five minutes later the jailer lay tightly bound and gagged on the bunk. With swift steps Dan moved to the end of the corridor which gave out into the alley, found the key after trying four, and let himself out into the night.

With the warm air running against him, he hesitated. Cold sense told him that he should get immediately away from Shadow Rock. A dangerous, deadly yeast was working in the town. He could feel it, hear it, by the way the saloons were booming. Shadow Rock meant to jerk him to his death this night.

But when he had planned how the knife should free him, Dan Shane had planned, too, how he would use his freedom. The Roaring Gorge trestle was in. That part of his work was done. There remained the grisly stain that clung to the name of Big Dave Shane. If old Cass Harper was right, the mystery of that could be broken. Wolf Brand held the key to it. And unless all the signs were wrong, it was Wolf Brand who had worked with Sling Cable in the attempted robbery of the Limited.

What happened to him after he cleared Big Dave, Dan Shane did not care. He thought of Ray Harper with a tightening of his lips. He would lose her—now, when he knew for sure that she loved him. Like a shadow he went down the alley. If Sling Cable was in Shadow Rock, he would find him.

Through alleys, between building gaps, clinging always to shadows and pools of darkness, Dan Shane combed the town of Shadow Rock. Through a grimy back window he saw Sling Cable at last—playing pool with two hardcases whose holsters were tied down. Grimly patient, Dan waited.

AFTER a lengthy run of bad luck Cable tossed down his cue, took a drink at the bar and headed for the door. He might turn right or left in the street. Dan guessed left, and guessed correctly.

As Sling Cable passed the narrow black opening at the corner of the building, a voice jerked at him: "Hold steady, Cable. There's a gun on you!"

Cable stopped dead.

"Come in here, Cable, off the walk. Do

it like you just happened to think of it."

Cable stepped reluctantly into the well of blackness. The jailer's gun, in Dan Shane's fist, prodded him in the ribs. Dan lifted Cable's gun out of leather.

"Shane? Cripes, Shane, don't kill me! I can explain. It was all a mistake."

"Shut up, Cable. Where's Wolf Brand?"

"Brand?" Cable's voice showed amazement. "Hell, Brand's dead by now, I reckon."

"You sure of that?"

"Blamed near. He was dyin' when I left him. They got him in that stickup. Slug through the chest."

"And you left him? You dirty skunk. Take me to him!"

"Damn it, Shane. He was as good as dead, I tell you."

"Take me to him, I said!"

On the edge of town, his back crawling with the expectation of a bullet from Dan Shane's gun, Cable lifted a pair of broncs from in front of a gambling house. On them they slid away from the seething town.

"In front, like you were last time," said Dan Shane tersely. "Tonight it'll turn out different. Watch yourself, Cable. I'd as soon kill you as not."

They struck into the dark mass of the hills, gravel spurting under driving hoofs. For the better part of an hour, riding hard and silently, they traveled a trail Dan knew well. Then, with a curt word of warning, Sling Cable cut to the left through a thick stand of old-growth pine. On through them into a high-walled canyon that flung back echoes gloomily, up a crumbling shale slope, over a brush-tipped ridge vaguely outlined in the moonlight. There was another hour of rough riding in that broken, treacherous country.

It was nearing midnight, Dan judged, when Cable pulled up. "The broncs stay here," he grunted. "It's footwork from now on in."

Between giant boulders Dan followed the panting Cable, for perhaps a quarter of a mile. Then Cable stopped. His breath was hissing out of his lungs. He listened, head cocked over on one side, then turned back to Dan. "Somebody's with him," he snapped. "Hear 'em? Must have come in from the other side; we didn't pass his bronc."

Voices were trailing faintly from beyond a jagged mound of rock. With Cable beside him, Dan crawled up the rock carefully and silently. He lay there, his gun out, peering down.

Beyond the mound was a shallow depression. Some thirty feet from Dan, a heap of coals glowed dully. By their light and the meager illumination of the moon Dan made out the figure of a man lying on a rumpled blanket. A gray beard reached down past his throat. He gave, instantly, an impression of size and strength, and Dan knew that he must be Wolf Brand, dying here in the mountains.

Brand was lurching heavily to one elbow, the better to face the man who stood spread-legged a dozen feet beyond him. Dan's breath sucked in sharply. That man was Darrel Ogden.

OGDEN was speaking in a thin rasp: "Where in hell are the men you promised to have here, Brand?"

Wolf Brand answered with heaving effort: "I sent 'em away. They ain't coming back."

"What for, damn you?"

"A slug through the guts makes a man think, Ogden. Your job stunk. I didn't want any part of it and they didn't."

"Don't preach to me."

"I'm not. You're not worth it. God knows I've done plenty I'd like to cross out, but there's still things I won't touch. Get the hell out of here an' let me die where it's clean."

"No man ever crossed me, Brand, and lived to tell about it," young Ogden snarled.

"It's the one thing," said Wolf Brand

slowly, "that makes me want my strength. I'd like to kill you, or watch you kick when they hang you."

"You never will, Brand. You won't even live to do the talking you'd like to do."

The figure of Darrel Ogden stiffened. His right hand flashed up and inside his coat.

The gun was half out when Dan Shane cried, "Hold it, Ogden!"

Darrel Ogden was motionless for only an instant. His head jerked; he flung himself backward. Dan shot, knew that he had missed, and shot again. Ogden was a scrambling shadow, blending into the night. The scraping sound of boots clawing at rock told him that he had got away into the darkness, unhit.

Silence fell thickly over that little pit in the mountains. A twig among the coals snapped excitedly. Dan Shane, with Cable beside him, slid down and stalked to where Wolf Brand lay. Ogden was gone, but Dan had not come here after Ogden.

Wolf Brand turned slowly on his back, looked up. "You didn't save much, mister," he said, "but I'm thankin' you anyhow."

"Don't thank me yet, Brand. I've got something to settle with you."

"Too late, son. Somebody beat you to it." The old outlaw chuckled grimly. Light from the dying coals stained his gray beard pink. Then the humor left him and he said abruptly, "I don't know you. Who are you?"

"Shane, my name is. Big Dave Shane was my father."

A long silence. "Oh," said Wolf Brand, "so that's it."

And Dan Shane knew that he had found his man. Fierceness sprang up in him, fierceness that had been searing his heart for long years.

"It was you that framed him!" he burst out bitterly. "Sent him to prison for a job he didn't do. Killed him. You'll clear him now, Brand, or by God—"

WOLF BRAND raised a weak hand. "I'm past scarin', kid," he said slowly. "Don't try it. I haven't got six hours to live, so a few more or less don't matter a damn. Yes, I framed Big Dave. I'd clear him now if I could, but it's too late. I framed him, which was bad enough, and I got paid for it, which was worse. It was a black job from start to finish. I ain't trying to excuse myself. I did it, and there it lies; I reckon there's something in every man's life he'd give everything he owns to wipe out—and can't."

"Who—who paid you, Brand?"

"Price Ogden paid me. I was sore at the road and I needed money bad. A man can be a fool sometimes. We picked the night of that storm, because it would cover tracks. I rode out to the Double D, told Big Dave that the ranchers were havin' a meeting, that they were going to back him in his fight to get a decent price out of the railroad. He came with me. There on Blindman's Curve I slugged him with a pistol barrel and dynamited the tracks. I didn't know it would pile up them cattle cars like it did. I was to collect more money from Ogden after it was over, but I didn't go after it. I cleared out, knowing what a dirty skunk I'd been. But I didn't have the guts to square it."

"Big Dave is dead," said Dan hoarsely, "but it's not too late. If—if I get you to Shadow Rock, Brand, will you tell the law what you've told me?"

"I reckon I would, kid. I'm dyin' now. That deal is the one thing I'd like to get off my chest. A few hours is all I got left to do it in. It'll be my word against Price Ogden's for part of it." The outlaw's voice trailed off. "Price Ogden wanted to make money fast. He wanted the part of the Double D that the railroad didn't need."

Elation burned through Dan Shane. The crime that stood on the records against the name of Big Dave Shane would be wiped off. Wolf Brand would live for a few hours. That was all he needed.

"Like father, like son," Brand was murmuring. "Only the kid is worse than old Price ever was. There's a devilish twist in him that ain't human." He fumbled for the sixgun that lay beside him and which he had not been fast enough to use against Darrel Ogden. "I should have shot him when he came here. The world stinks when he's in it."

Mention of Darrel Ogden's name made Dan stop short. He had forgotten him. Now a ghastly suspicion began to take hold of his mind. His voice was strained as he asked, "Brand, that job he was talking about—what was it?"

"Same job his dad pulled before him, ten years ago. Only this time it's the new bridge over Roaring Gorge. The Ogdens got a strangle hold on the road an' on most of the ranches. If the bridge goes out the whole works will smash. They'll be rich men. There's a work train crossin' at daylight. It'll go down along with the bridge."

In a swift, tense movement Dan Shane was crouching by the outlaw's side. His fingers bit into Wolf Brand's shoulder convulsively. "Brand! That's not where he was going from here?"

Wolf Brand flinched at the bite of those fingers. "I reckon it is," he said between his teeth. "He couldn't hire the job done. There's the kind of rotten blood in him it would take to do it!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Ride to Dishonor

DAN SHANE straightened stiffly. The black night sky with its pale moon seemed to swoop down at him, as if to crush him. He forgot the dying man at his feet; he forgot Sling Cable, slouching sullenly half a dozen paces away.

The flaming picture in his mind was the picture of the Shadow Rock cattle country going under in smashing ruin. Loss of the bridge would do it. Stubbornly fighting ranchers, already battered to their knees, would be wiped out. Two men would be enriched—and blight and suffering would sweep over the rest.

Dan Shane raised tortured eyes to the sky. Three hours till dawn. If a man rode with the devil in his spurs he might reach Roaring Gorge by then.

He couldn't go. It was too much to ask. The one man who might clear the dishonored name of Big Dave Shane lay here, dying. A few hours more and he would be dead, his lips sealed. He had to get Wolf Brand to Shadow Rock.

Yet as he thought these things, Dan Shane knew that he could not do it. The past was a dead thing and could not be recalled. The bridge was alive; it meant life to half a hundred men and women. He must save it if he could. Wolf Brand must die, his story untold.

Hope sprang up in Dan as he looked at Sling Cable, and as quickly it departed. The treacherous Cable would give him no help.

Dan knelt by Wolf Brand's side, gripped the outlaw's hand briefly. "We won't be going to Shadow Rock," he said. "Thanks anyhow. Big Dave'll understand."

Dan Shane rode that night as no sane man would have ridden. Brush flogged him steadily, and he had no hat to protect his face. More than once the mount under him lost footing on slippery rock, came with an ace of going down.

One thought hammered in his head, one desire. He must reach the Roaring Gorge trestle before Darrel Ogden. He flung out of his mind the knowledge that each step toward it was sealing more securely the disgrace of his father. Yet it haunted him, tortured him.

When he dared lift his glance from the murky trail, he stared at the eastern horizon, afraid always that he would see that warning band of gray. At daylight the work train would be pulling across Roaring

Gorge. And old Cass Harper would be braking on it! Darrel Ogden had given him his job again. A job on a train that was going to hell!

Breath was heaving in and out of the pony's lungs in great gusts. He would last—he must last. The first light of day filtered through the dark before Dan Shane was aware of it. The sight of it brought a stifling sob into his throat. But he was there. He was rocketing along a ridge top that was within gunshot of the gorge.

Below him the lumpy shape of the construction camp loomed vaguely in the dim light. Even at a distance he got the sense of bustle and stir. The work train was being hooked up. A hundred feet to the right rose the crisscrossed timbers of the trestle.

SHADOWS still lay heavy and thick in the gorge. Dan Shane probed them with desperate intentness. A shadow slipped out of a deeper blot of dark, flitted along a ledge of rock, dropped to a lower level. Daylight was seeping down into the gorge. The shadow was a man. He was working his way swiftly down the far side of the gorge, fifty yards from the trestle.

Dan Shane had lost the jailer's gun during his ride, but he had Sling Cable's. He could see more clearly now. He shouted. The jumping, dodging man stopped, looked up. It was Darrel Ogden, and there was a bundle under his arm.

Jaw set, Dan triggered, aiming carefully. The range was long for a short gun. Ogden froze, whipped out a revolver from a shoulder holster. Echoes boomed through the gorge as he began to shoot.

Only two shells left in his gun, Dan thought. He had no more. One of those two had to stop Darrel Ogden. Through the clamoring bursts of sound Dan heard a faint blur of cheers from behind and above him. The work train must be pulling out of the construction camp. He shot again, missed.

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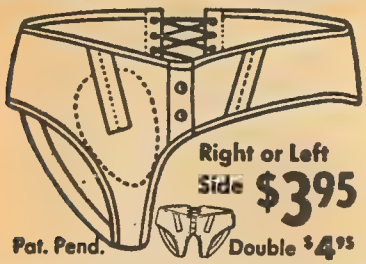

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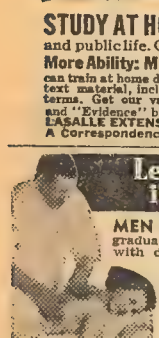

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A sledgehammer blow struck him suddenly in the shoulder, knocked him back and down. It dazed him for a moment, dragged the strength out of him. He crawled to the edge of the shelf, pulled his gun up, resting it on a rock. He tightened his finger on the trigger slowly. He saw Darrel Ogden dodge back, saw the gray bundle flip out of his fingers.

With the uncanny uncertainty of dynamite the bundle bounced twice without exploding. Then came a gigantic flash—the shock of the concussion.

Chips of rock rattled against the timbers of the trestle a hundred feet away. Dan Shane's eyes were glued to the smoke, trying to pierce it as it slowly cleared. The bridge was intact!

Dan's eyes went up. The work train had nosed out over the gorge, stopped.

A voice drove down harshly at Dan Shane. "Don't move, Shane, or I'll plug you where you are!"

Dan turned his head. Men were crowding to the rim above him. Sheriff Lon Hilyard stood there, a revolver in his hand.

Through cupped hands Darrel Ogden was bawling, "It's Shane, Hilyard! I caught him trying to dynamite the bridge!"

A line of men came sliding down the footpath. They picked Dan Shane up, hustled him to the top. A bitter indifference worked through Dan Shane.

Sullenly, angry cattlemen of Shadow Rock were crowding close, shifting ominously. Sheriff Hilyard's face was very grave and very stern. His gun was still out in his fist. "Don't try nothing, boys," he warned. "He's my prisoner. He goes back to Shadow Rock—alive!"

There was milling and confusion as horses were brought. Dan Shane was boosted up into a saddle. Darrel Ogden had come up from the gorge, meanwhile. He talked steadily in a high voice. "He was trying to dynamite the bridge. I had a hunch, seeing he had broken jail. . . . He

dropped the dynamite when I put a bullet in him. . . ."

IT WAS a grim cavalcade that forged into Shadow Rock. Dan Shane, broken and bloody, slumped in the saddle. On his right rode Sheriff Lon Hilyard, stern-faced, silent. On his left was Darrel Ogden, lips twisted as he blurted volubly the story he had concocted. And behind the three rode the procession of death-hungry riders.

Dan's mount stopped suddenly, and he looked up. A broad, heavy figure was blocking the street. It was Price Ogden! He was hatless and his heavy-jowled face was set, almost unrecognizable.

"Damn it, Price," Hilyard growled, "you can't—"

But Price Ogden wasn't looking at the sheriff. His eyes were fixed on his son with a look of loathing and hate. His voice had the power of an explosion. "I told you what I'd do if you touched that bridge! You twisted devil. You're no son of mine!"

Darrel Ogden's face was pasty. "The bridge hasn't been harmed," he croaked. "I didn't—"

"Don't lie to me, damn you! I heard it! I'm doing now what I should have done a long time ago. I've been too weak. I've let you do to me what your mother did before you. Turn me into a swine who hates the sight of himself. Your mother hounded me into it ten years ago. There was that first dirty job on Blindman's Curve. Men killed and maimed so that I could make a few rotten dollars. Well, she's out of my heart now. I can see straight again. I'm killing you first. Then I'm paying the law for what I've done!"

Price Ogden's hand was in the pocket of his coat. He jerked it out, gripping a small-caliber revolver.

Dan jerked his head, saw Darrel Ogden's fist whip toward his shoulder holster. Two shots smashed the dead quiet. A small round hole in his forehead, Price Ogden

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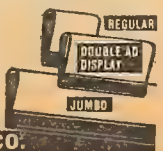

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fell straight forward into the dirt of the street. Darrel Ogden's mouth opened, a groan broke from it. Blood gushed between his teeth as he fell across the horse, slid out of the saddle.

"God," breathed Hilyard. "Killed each other. What in hell was he talkin' about? Didn't make sense."

"I'll make—sense out of it!"

The voice was weak and husky, but it gripped attention. The pain of his shoulder made Dan Shane sick and dizzy, but he looked up dully.

With all eyes focused on Price Ogden, a horse and rider had come up unseen. The slouching, emaciated Sling Cable led the horse. The man in the saddle, who was bent forward, gripping the horn with one hand and a sagging pistol with the other, was the gray-bearded Wolf Brand.

Through a swirling fog Dan Shane heard him say, "Had to—get it off my—chest, kid, 'fore I died. When you took out—after that Ogden pup—figgered it was the only decent thing I could do. Put—a gun on Cable made him bring me—in. Sheriff's here, ain't he? Sheriff? Listen hard—Sheriff. I got a lot to tell you in a mighty—short time. Beginnin' with Big Dave—Shane. An' about the kid here—who got framed. . . ."

The swirling fog engulfed Dan Shane. He heard no more. He was lying on his back, on a pool table, when he came to. A face he knew was close to his.

"Ray," he whispered.

Her lips touched his. There were tears of happiness in the brown eyes. "He cleared you, Danny, and he cleared Big Dave. Oh, Danny, Danny, it's all right now. The town's celebrating. They're drinking to Big Dave, Danny."

Dan Shane grinned. "Let's give them something else to drink to, Ray. Say to the daughter of a railroader, who's due to marry as soon as we find a preacher sober enough to say the words." ● ● ●

(Continued from page 8)

around here. We ain't shot anybody since the day before yesterday, but we'll sure break the quiet spell if you ain't running down the trail before sundown." But the preacher was a pretty nervy cuss. He tried to keep out of sight, but he didn't leave town. Before meeting time one of the meanest fellows in camp, a fellow called Dare Devil Dick, hunted up the preacher. Dick's six-shooters had put a lot of people under the sod.

"I'm going with you tonight, Parson," he said. "Figure you might need someone like me to back you up."

The preacher faced a mighty angry crowd when he mounted the platform, but their yells soon quieted down when Dare Devil Dick climbed up behind him and started talking.

"Now, you fellows listen to me. I reckon you all know me. You know I ain't no angel. I had to shoot Bill Sikes for killing that boy, because he wouldn't play poker with him. And Buckskin Joe and Seven-Up Pete were second on the draw when I argued with them.

"I've been clawed by grizzlies, scalped by Indians, and shot a dozen times. Once I stumbled into a quartz mill and run clean through it, but what was left of me panned out pure gold and it was a good lesson to me. Yes, sir, I've been bad. I've been tough, but I figure every man is entitled to his chance and I aim to see this preacher has his chance to speak to you onery citizens. I see you're all wearing your guns, and aim to bluff this parson out of camp. Well, you ain't going to do it. I'm holding the high hand in this game and I'll raise the first one that makes a bluff."

Dare Devil Dick pulled a whopping big six-shooter out of his belt and said, "No one is leaving, and you're all going to get a big load of religion." He turned to the preacher and said, "All right, Parson, give 'em hell. I'm right behind you."

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Well, with that sort of backing the preacher had brimstone burning right under the crowd's feet before the night was over.

IT NEVER took much to cause a shooting in Tombstone. A couple of mining partners named Thompson and Jones came to town one day to get some new duds. Thompson walked out of the dry goods store wearing a shirt that looked like it had been cut out of the center of a rainbow. Everyone he met as he strolled down Tough Nut Street laughed at the sight of the shirt. Thompson had no idea what they were laughing at. He thought he was looking pretty sporty.

"What's so damn funny?" he finally asked

"That shirt," the crowd yelled at him, and another whoop went up.

Thompson was getting madder than a cornered steer. "I'll kill the next son that laughs," he swore.

The crowd quieted down at that. Thompson walked on to the corner just as Jones came out of a saloon. Jones took one look and started to laugh.

"Plum gorgeous," Jones laughed. "Plum gorgeous. Where did you get it?"

He didn't finish the question, as Thompson's six-shooter put an end to the fun. It cost him a pardner, but he still had his loud shirt.

Those were some of the stories Wyatt Earp told me in Santa Fe. After we had eaten at a restaurant I asked if he was stopping at the hotel. No, he said. It was too public. He had a room with some friends. We went there.

When we entered the room, I started to strike a match to light a lamp on a table. "Hold it," he said. He put a blanket over the one window, and then lit the lamp. "I've made plenty of enemies in my travels who'd like to take a shot at me in the dark. You're no angel yourself, and some fellow

might see us and try for a reputation by potting us through the window."

We talked away into the night about Wichita, Abilene, Ellsworth and Dodge, and then about his work at Tombstone. "They didn't run me out of Tombstone, as some papers said," he told me. "After I'd defied Behan and all the rest, we rode out of Tombstone in broad daylight. We never looked back and the wild bunch there could have killed us all, but they didn't have the guts.

"I made a lot of friends while in Tombstone that I will never forget," Wyatt said, "and I wish them all well. I made a lot of enemies, and about all I can say for them is to hell with them, as I was always on the side of the law."

When I left Wyatt the next day, he said, "Don't suppose we'll meet again, but my advice to you is to go back east, get married and settle down, as it will be a long time before this country is proper tamed."

It was good advice, and as a matter of fact, that's just what I did. But I'll never forget the Earp boys—Virgil, Wyatt, Morgan, Warren and James.

Nor will the rest of us ever forget the exploits of Wyatt Earp and his famous brothers, the men who put the law's stamp on the West. For their deeds not only made history, but they set a pattern of courage and high drama that has acted as an inspiration for not only factual historians, but for those men who have created that great body of literature—the fiction of the West.

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The next issue of New Western will be published April 25th. See you then, *amigos*. —*The Editor*.

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(Continued from page 44)

"He's fine, Bill. Just fine."

Toggleson tried to nod. His head wouldn't move. "Did I kill Ord?"

"You hit him twice but he won't die," Clay Barnett said.

"That's good. I wouldn't like to know that I'd killed a man."

Pain was beginning to gnaw at him but he couldn't tell exactly where it was coming from. Clay Barnett looked strange to him. His face was all twisted. Toggleson heard someone say, "Get that blanket up here, boys. We've got to have a stretcher." He closed his eyes and dozed off.

TOGGLESON was able to sit up and talk to people a week after the shooting. And a lot of people there were. The president of the Citizens Committee came around to say that they had talked again to Clay Barnett and that Barnett had convinced them that Toggleson was the man for the marshal's job. Barnett wouldn't listen to any argument about it. People began to remember back to when William Toggleson had been the marshal of Dodge City. They were beginning to say that he had been as good as Bat Masterson. Of course he didn't have the color, but . . .

All in all, Toggleson was slightly dazed at the attention he was getting. He tried once to tell them that he hadn't had anything to do with it. That it was just a thing that had happened. But they didn't believe him.

Toggleson sat back in an easy chair, a blanket over his legs. He could hear his wife in the kitchen. Outside, he could hear Robert and Tommy Barnett playing again. It was Saturday.

"Bang, bang!" young Robert Toggleson shouted. "I'm a U. S. marshal, like my father."

Despite his wound, William Toggleson felt better than he had for a long time. ● ● ●

(Continued from page 85)

to beat hell, onct he gits started—specially when he gits a few drinks in under his belt. I'm a-tellin' you he had some of the boys sort of shiftin' around in their chairs when he told about hell."

"So you figure he's okay, eh?"

"Shore I do! Look at it sensible. If we got to have a preacher on the crick, it's a damn sight better to have one that's lib'ral minded enough to smoke an' drink an' play stud—but which wouldn't rob no safe—than it would be to git one which he'd raise hell with the boys fer drinkin' an' gamblin', an' then turn around an' rob the safe."

The big man grinned. "I believe you've got somethin' there, Cush."

"Yer damn right! But you ain't got to take my word fer it. This here's a Wednesday. An' Wednesday nights the reverend has what he calls prayer meetin's. They start early an' don't last no hell of a while, on account the boys like to git the stud game goin'. Some of 'em ain't finished their clean-up, an' they don't like to stay up too late when they got to work next play. He don't do no reg'lar preachin' tonight, like Sunday—but he kin pray damn near as good as he kin preach. Come on over tonight, an' I'll bet you the drinks you'll claim you never heard no better prayin'."

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Black John downed his drink and turned from the bar. "I'll take you up on that, Cush. I'll be over right after supper."

Early in the evening he paused in the doorway of the saloon and peered in to see a dozen or more men seated in chairs listening to the impassioned words of the Reverend Ishmael Saunders who knelt before the bar in an attitude of rapt devotion.

SEVERAL minutes later he closed with a fervent "Amen," and rising to his feet, reached for the bottle and glass Cush had placed conveniently at hand. He filled the glass and turned as the men rose from their chairs and crowded to the bar. Catching sight of Black John standing in the doorway, his lips parted in a welcoming smile. The next instant the smile died on his lips and his eyes widened, then suddenly narrowed at sight of the man who had stepped into the room and stood beside the big man. The next instant the newcomer pointed a finger. "That's him! That's the skunk who—"

Like a flash the glass dropped to the floor. The hand that had held it plunged into the front of his shirt and came out with a six-gun. A shot rang out—and the Reverend Ishmael Saunders reeled backward against the bar, then suddenly collapsed and slithered to the floor, as the men of Halfaday stared wide-eyed at the big black revolver in Black John's hand.

Cush was the first to find his voice. "What—what the hell?" he cried, as he stared at Black John.

The big man shrugged. "Nothin' much, except you've got to readjust your estimate of the Reverend Ishmael Saunders. The fact is, he shot this man an' murdered his brother an' made off with twelve hundred an' sixty ounces of their dust down on the river a few weeks back. I run onto their camp when I was comin' back from that trip with the Siwash, an' when I saw that Bronson here wasn't dead, I flagged down the

Racket an' we got him to Dawson where Doc Sutherland give him a fifty-fifty chance to pull through."

"But," Cush asked, "did you know the reverend there was the one that done it when you fetched him up here?"

"Oh shore. That is, I had a damn good notion he was when I noticed that his pack was small — but damned heavy — about twelve hundred an' sixty ounces heavy, to be exact. I knew onct he got to Halfaday he'd stay here to keep away from the police. So, when I took that batch of dust back, an' found out that Bronson had recovered, I hunted him up, figurin' that if he could identify Saunders as the man who murdered his brother an' robbed him, we'd hold a miners' meetin' an' hang him." The big man paused and glanced into the faces of the men. "You all saw him identify Saunders. An' under the circumstances, you all understand why I figured a miners' meetin' was impractical. We'll adjourn to One Eyed John's cabin now, remove them twelve hundred an' sixty ounces, turn 'em over to Bronson—an' the case will be closed." ● ● ●

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